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THE PERJURER

BY

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CHAPTER I

THE CONQUERING DERELICT

It was in the early part of the year 1886 that Lord Lavernock, after having held high office in many successive Liberal administrations, announced his definite retirement from public life. Of course he might, like other Whigs who could not lend a hand in the disruption of the Empire, have continued to serve his country in the Unionist ranks; but he was already a sexagenarian, he had never been a man of pliable mind and he regarded the virtual extinction of the party to which he had belonged from his youth up as involving his own. You may be unable to follow a leader tragically transformed into a will-o'-the-wisp; yet you may be, and ought to be, equally unable to vote with your lifelong opponents. So he said, and so his tall, thin figure, his aquiline nose, his somewhat dry, official manner and his harsh, unmodulated voice were seen and heard no more in an assemblage which, to tell the truth, did not miss him much. He had been a conscientious, painstaking member of the executive in his day; but his colleagues and subordinates had always found him a rather troublesome sort of man to work with, while his demeanour

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towards his political adversaries had been habitually arrogant and ungracious. Thus he disappeared from the arena, generally respected, little regretted, destined to quick oblivion.

A recent bereavement which he had sustained in the loss of his wife was mentioned by him as contributing towards the desire which he expressed to end his days in seclusion ; but it is doubtful whether the demise of Lady Lavernock—a harmless, negligible person who had worn a brown wig, taken a languid interest in landscape gardening and slept fully twelve hours out of the twenty-four—left any perceptible blank in his methodical, well-ordered existence. What probably gave him a good deal more of a shock was the news which reached him during the autumn of that same eventful year that his only brother, Colonel Monk, had suddenly dropped down dead while deer-stalking in Scotland.

“How like poor Percy!” was his involuntary ejaculation on reading the telegram.

Colonel Monk, it is true, had never gone quite so far as to drop down dead before ; but he had repeatedly vexed his elder brother by doing unexpected, disconcerting things ; so that this final act of his seemed to be only of a piece with previous indiscretions. Not the least amongst these had been his abrupt marriage, somewhat late in life, to a lady whom he had “picked up,” to use Lord Lavernock’s phrase, during a sporting tour in Canada, and who, unhappily, had not survived the birth of her first child. The alliance had not been one which the head of an ancient and distinguished house could welcome with enthusiasm ; still he had been frigidly civil to Mrs. Monk and had made a point

of personally attending her funeral ; for he was ever punctilious in the discharge of family obligations. He had then dismissed her from his memory. She had been, at worst, but a transient annoyance. However, nothing can happen in this world, nor can anybody be numbered amongst its inhabitants, without consequences, and one very disagreeable consequence of Mrs. Monk's brief sojourn here below and her husband's unheralded surrender to heart disease was that the widowed Lord Lavernock found himself with a small orphan girl upon his hands.

Such, at least, was the immediate view that he took of the situation, and he was confirmed in it by his sister, Lady Elizabeth Barton, whom he made haste to consult. Lady Elizabeth, considerably his junior, was at that time just beginning to be a hostess of some importance in fashionable and political circles. Married to a man of ability and amiability who seemed to be marked out for office under a Conservative ministry, she had numerous claims upon her time and attention besides those of her half-dozen children. Perhaps that was why she did not feel particularly eager to make an addition to the latter category. Possibly even that may have been why she said at once to her brother :

"Oh, but you couldn't ! Quite out of the question for you to undertake such a charge under existing circumstances ! Of course it must be for us to give the poor little thing shelter."

This was a good way to arouse opposition on the part of a man prone to controversy.

"I do not agree with you, Elizabeth," Lord Lavernock answered ; "I do not see why you, who have entered

another family, should assume responsibilities which clearly belong to mine. The child being my brother's child and bearing my name, I am her natural guardian, and this house is her natural home. After all," he added, with a slight smile, "it ought to be large enough to hold her and me."

Lavernock House, where the conversation was being held, was an enormous stone building of no great architectural pretensions, but imposing and even beautiful by reason of its position on a slope of the Wiltshire downs and of the wide vistas of undulating park-land and magnificent timber which its windows commanded. It was not a show place, because—mercifully for its inmates—it was not easily accessible by rail; but stray tourists, interested in landscape gardening, sometimes asked leave to inspect the endless avenues, alleys and glades which surrounded it on every side, and received reluctant permission to do so. Upon principle, Lord Lavernock recognised that landowners have no right to be selfish, although, as a matter of personal taste, he did not at all like intruders. Nor did he like little girls. He went on to admit as much, and his sister repeated with a shade less of finality in her tone than before:

"Quite out of the question! No lone widower could be expected to take on a job of that sort."

"Nurses and governesses?" suggested the lone widower.

"Oh, obviously. I didn't mean that you would have to wash and dress the child with your own hands or teach her to spell. But governesses are a scourge, as you would know if you had had as much to do with them as I have; and then, you see, the girl will grow

up, and very likely she will be pretty, and with New-bridge growing up at the same time and all—frankly, Lavernock, *do* you think it's desirable?"

"No, Elizabeth," answered her brother, "I do not. I think it from almost every point of view the reverse of desirable. But a duty is a duty."

"It's true," observed Lady Elizabeth meditatively, "that she may be an interest and an amusement for you."

"I cannot say that I anticipate her being either, and I gathered from your previous remarks that you thought her much more likely to prove a plague."

"Well, I've offered to relieve you of her. What more can I do?"

"Nothing at present, I am afraid. Perhaps, if I live until she is of an age to be introduced to society—but that is scarcely probable—I may ask for your good offices on her behalf. For the time being, my feeling is that she must be accepted, as so many of poor Percy's vagaries had to be accepted, without futile murmuring. Only in a very limited sense are we able to order the course of our lives." Episodes such as this, for which we are in no way accountable, occur, and we can but try to make the best of them."

It was in the above spirit of resigned martyrdom that Lord Lavernock clothed himself for the reception of a young lady who was to play a far more important part in his future than he had the least intention of assigning to her. About a week later Miss Helen Monk, aged about four-and-a-half, arrived—a very small person, with a composed manner, an articulation singularly distinct for her years and great, solemn eyes as

black as her frock. She did not appear to be at all overawed on being ushered into the august presence of her uncle, although he was a man with whom few people could contrive to look or feel at ease.

"Daddy's dead," she opened the interview by announcing.

"Alas! yes, my dear," Lord Lavernock gravely replied, and proceeded to deliver a little sententious speech which he had prepared for the occasion.

This, like many orations of his, addressed to a larger audience "in another place," fell remarkably flat. The child, without noticing observations which may have struck her as more or less irrelevant, quietly finished her own interrupted sentence with, "So I'm going to live with you."

She spoke as one who makes an agreeable intimation and is ready for any expressions of pleasure or gratitude with which it may be greeted. Her uncle's greeting of it was an abrupt, explosive laugh. She looked a little surprised, but was not nearly as much so as most people would have been; for Lord Lavernock scarcely ever laughed. He did not, as a general rule, think things funny; but he did think that this was a very funny little girl, and the abiding affection which he was to conceive for her seems to have taken its start from the moment of their first introduction to one another. In later years he used to say that he had been at once attracted by Helen's absolute honesty and veracity—qualities which so rarely adorn her sex and are not too common amongst humanity at large. But it is more likely that he was drawn towards her because she was not a bit afraid of him. Helen Monk, as a matter of

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fact, was one of those favoured mortals who from cradle to grave remain unacquainted with the sensation of fear and whom, in consequence of that immunity of theirs, one almost hesitates to call brave. However, there is no reason why an impartial biographer should not give her credit for the innate truthfulness which her uncle was so quick to appreciate. As a small child, as a girl and as a woman, she seldom concealed her feelings and never affected any which she did not entertain. It was hardly to be expected that, at her tender age, she should grieve much for a father whom she had seen very little, and it was only natural that her affections, which were strong, should be centred upon her nurse. Either as the result of promptings on the nurse's part or of doubts which had taken shape in the recesses of her own callow mind, she went on to say decisively:

"Nana is going to live here too."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," Lord Lavernock replied. "If, as I suppose, you allude to Mrs. Hopkins, of whom I have received excellent reports, there is no intention of removing you from her care."

The child, gravely nodding, signified that, upon that understanding, all would be well. There was a quaint mixture of familiarity and dignity in her words, her looks and her whole personality which may have made appeal to one so desperately dignified that nobody had ever dared to be familiar with him before; but it is less easy to account for the promptitude with which she, on her side, attached herself to a dry, pedantic stranger. Perhaps there really was some underlying bond of sympathy between two characters so dissimilar upon the surface; perhaps their instinctive recognition of one

another as loyal (they were both of them that, although sound judgment and the sense of abstract justice had been granted to neither), may have served as the sufficient foundation of a tacit, but durable alliance.

Be that as it may, the alliance was concluded then and there, to remain unshaken by the long years of close intimacy, the not infrequent differences of opinion, the various troubles and trials which were in store for it. When Helen Monk, grown up into a tall and tately young lady, looked back upon those years of her departed childhood, they seemed to her to present an unbroken record of contentment. She could not remember to have once felt bored during the course of them or once desired to hasten their passage. She could never understand what people meant by asking her, as they did from time to time, whether she did not feel the want of companions. "There's always uncle," she would answer wonderingly, and in perfect good faith. If the same question had been addressed to "uncle" (and the manner of life which it pleased him to lead might well have justified such an inquiry), he would very probably have replied, "There's always Helen." The pair, who began by meeting after a formal fashion and at stated hours daily, soon found that this arrangement did not satisfy their mutual curiosity. They therefore agreed—or, to speak more accurately, Helen decreed—that it should be amended and that access to any room in the house should be permitted at all hours to one who became its virtual mistress almost from the moment that her toddling feet first crossed its threshold. When Lord Lavernock was busy she sat as quiet as a mouse, turning over the leaves of picture-books and

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watching him furtively from beneath her long, dark eyelashes until he manifested some disposition towards social intercourse. Then she would scramble up on his knee and converse in a style which never failed to charm him.

"That child has a most original mind," he was fond of declaring.

Original or not, she had at all events the advantage of knowing it, and thus she obtained without effort pretty nearly everything upon which it was set. Her Aunt Elizabeth, who paid short visits to Wiltshire every now and then, and who noted with mingled amusement and apprehension the very unexpected turn that matters were taking, felt bound to point out that there is no kindness to children in making them of so much consequence; but Lord Lavernock returned that that depends entirely upon the children. He also said that there was not the slightest danger of Helen's being spoilt, and that girls require a different kind of treatment from that which is known to succeed in the case of boys.

He certainly practised a very different kind of treatment in the case of his own boy; but the success of it had at no time been conspicuous. His only son, no doubt, had certain defects of character which the ordinary course of school training might or might not have eradicated. They were almost certain to be fostered, in their relation to home life, by his father's disastrous custom of keeping up against him the memory of delinquencies for which the penalty had been paid. It is wise and salutary to whip a boy who has told you a lie; it is most foolish and baneful to impress upon him

that he has forfeited your confidence. Lord Lavernock complained that Newbridge was for ever deceiving him, and was amazed and scandalised when Mr. Barton, his good-natured brother-in-law, rejoined, "Ah, I shouldn't wonder. It's what you're for ever inviting him to do, you know."

Possibly Lord Lavernock, like George Washington, was incapable of lying. He was honestly under that impression, honestly persuaded that there must needs be something abnormal and grievous about a Monk who could stoop to falsehood or even prevarication. With shame and reluctance, yet actuated by a sense of imperative duty, he warned Newbridge's tutor at Eton of what must be expected, and was smilingly told in reply that his son did not appear to differ in any alarming degree from other little boys. "Rather idle, I must confess, and perhaps more apt to get into mischief than he ought to be; but good at games and popular in the house. He wouldn't be popular, depend upon it, if there were anything seriously amiss. Pray, don't distress yourself about him."

This merely forced Lord Lavernock to conclude that the Eton tutor lacked discernment. That he himself might be open to the same charge never occurred to him; much less did he suspect that his eminently sane mind might be poisoned by a touch of the prejudice which so many fathers, consciously or unconsciously, harbour against their heirs. He was sorry that he had reasons for thinking badly of the boy; he did not ask himself whether he was or was not fond of him. Only, being human, he felt the need of being fond of somebody, and so it was that Helen became more

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to him than Newbridge had ever been or was likely to be.

When Newbridge came home for the holidays—a very handsome lad, dark of complexion, like all his family, and, like most of them, slim, graceful and muscular—his small cousin contemplated him with a respectful admiration which he did not even deign to notice. He was ten years older than she, and her existence as an additional member of the establishment interested him much less than the advent of a newly born litter of retriever pups. An occasional patronising word or two was all she got from him, and if his prowess in the saddle or with gun and cricket-bat caused her to regard him as a demigod, he remained serenely indifferent to a conquest which was but one of many. The observant Helen soon realised that there was little love lost between father and son, and this both perplexed and grieved her; but she asked no questions, merely registering an inward resolution to set things upon a happier footing some day. From the dawn of her life up to its meridian she ever retained a comfortable belief in her ability to mould the immalleable clay of human destinies.

For the rest, notwithstanding the great attraction that Newbridge had for her, she was never very sorry when he went back to Eton. His departure was the signal for renewal of that close intercourse with her uncle which his arrival more or less perceptibly checked; no sooner was he out of the house than Lord Lavernock's stern visage relaxed; the servants also, who adored the young lord, grew once more attentive to a young lady of whom they were apt to lose sight in the effulgence of a

brighter light ; in a word, Miss Helen reverted to the position of first fiddle, after playing second for a time. Who does not prefer leading to following ? Only the poor in spirit ; and if theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, it is certain that they will exercise scant authority on earth. Now Miss Helen Monk was of the stuff whereof benevolent despots are made.

She grew up to and in the free exercise of benevolence and despotism. Her successive governesses had no trouble with her, nor did they give her any. One after another, they succumbed to her gentle, smiling declaration of independence, did as she bade them and were seldom, if ever, bidden to do anything of which their consciences were afraid. As for Lord Lavernock, his docility was less visible, because the mental attitude of a lifetime is not readily abandoned ; so he frequently argued with his niece, and sometimes rebuked her for her soul's good. Yet she knew so well how to take him that his opinion was generally found in the long run to be identical with hers. Of course this was not surprising if, as he was more than once heard to aver, the child was "always right." The child may not have been always right ; only she possessed, in addition to a strong will, a temper of invincible sweetness, and what lonely old man could withstand so powerful and rare a combination as that ?

Lord Lavernock was as lonely as a man in his position could contrive to make himself, receiving few visitors in the country and only occupying his London house when he was obliged. His sister opined that this was not at all good for him, and perhaps it was not ; but he never paid much attention to what his sister said.

"If you can point out any duties that I neglect," he

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told her once, in answer to remonstrances, "I will endeavour to perform them. Personally, I think that my present way of living is suitable to my years, desirable for my health and injurious to nobody. I confess that I do not see how it could be improved upon."

Nor did Helen.

CHAPTER II

THE COUSINS

THE park at Lavernock is situated at such a height above the sea level and includes in its ample embrace so many acres of woodland that even on a sultry August afternoon ladies who are not too particular about their complexions may saunter across it with tolerable certainty of encountering cool breezes and little fear of the heat of the sun. A lady whose complexion was of that healthily pallid description which goes with black hair and has the privilege of immunity from tan or freckles was thus employed on a day some fifteen years later than that on which she had made first acquaintance with hills, dales and copses now grown so familiar to her. Tall, handsome, carrying her head erect and moving with the easy grace of one accustomed to use her limbs freely, the developed Helen was a credit to those who had brought her up, as well as to her family, her station and herself. It is sometimes said derisively of majestic persons that they "look as if the whole place belonged to them." It may be said without any derisive suggestion of Miss Monk that she looked very much as if Lavernock belonged to her; and this was the more excusable because, to most intents and purposes, it did.

Circumstances had conferred upon her the dignity of a *châtelaine*, and she had accepted her part with no sort of reluctance. Her uncle's increasing tendency in his old age to delegate the management of his estates, as well as the control of his household, to her capable hands; her own love for her home and for the little army of dependents appertaining to it; most of all, perhaps, the indifference of the heir apparent, who did not care for the place, and whose visits were few and far between—all these causes had combined to bring about a result which, as the far-seeing were given to remark, shaking their heads, hardly made for the girl's future happiness.

However, she had occasional reminders of the transient and precarious nature of her tenure; for the heir did come down from time to time—when he wanted money. He was coming down that afternoon, and it was as certain as anything could be that he would want money. That was why Helen had set forth to intercept him on his way from the station, and that was why, when she halted awhile beneath a clump of spreading beeches, the sun, filtering through the green canopy overhead, fell upon a somewhat grave and anxious countenance. For Lord Lavernock, though very rich and by no means close-fisted, was not the man to let himself be despoiled by a gambling spendthrift. For years past he had made his son an allowance which he rightly deemed to be much more than sufficient for the needs of any young Guardsman, and the demands that Newbridge made upon him were seldom conceded without scenes which even a tactful mediator could scarcely restrain from ending in open rupture. Newbridge was avowedly a

gambler ; also he usually had a string of animals in training which did not win races for him ; also, unlike his cousin, he had a fractious, irritable temper ; finally, he was unlike her, in that he was, and always had been, thoroughly afraid of his father. Who knows but that this may have been his worst offence in the old man's eyes, as it had unquestionably lain at the root of the endless squabbles and misunderstandings which had opened a gulf between the father and son ? Helen bridged it to the best of her ability ; but she was far too well acquainted with them both by this time to flatter herself that she could do more than maintain a condition of armed and angry peace. And just now the situation was complicated by an inopportune attack of gout. Lord Lavernock's fortitude under the periodical pangs of that malady was admirable ; still it was not altogether safe for anybody except Helen to approach him while they lasted.

"Newbridge won't want to see him," she mused, as she stood there and absently flicked away the beech-mast with the tip of her closed sunshade : "but he may insist upon seeing Newbridge. I wonder whether I had better let them meet or not. One has to set the chance of an air-clearing storm against the risk of mere sarcasms and sulks. Upon the whole, I don't think I will."

Presently, at the sound of wheels, she issued from that dappled shade, and in another minute a dogcart appeared, driven at high speed by a young man in a straw hat who raised his elbow in salutation at sight of her and promptly drew rein.

"I came to meet you," she announced, in that clear,

low-pitched voice which was one of her pleasant attributes. "Get down and walk with me, if you don't mind."

The young man complied without demur. He preferred any method of locomotion to that of putting one foot before another; but he was in the habit of obeying his cousin. Besides, he wished to talk to her. What he wished to say was exactly what she had anticipated. A calamitous Goodwood, a still more calamitous succession of evenings at the card-table, an overdrawn banking account, and those infernal, blood-sucking Jews! It was an oft-told tale, the poignancy of which was scarcely dulled by its monotony.

"I'm afraid you won't get as much as that," was Helen's sole observation, after it had culminated in the mention of an imposing sum as quite indispensable.

Newbridge accommodately suggested half the amount; but she still looked dubious. "You come at a bad moment. He has been in horrible pain for the last two days, and unfortunately he has heard from somebody where you were staying for the Goodwood week. You know how he hates that card-playing set."

"I know that if people are friends of mine, that's quite enough to make him hate them like poison," the young man answered, with a quick frown. "Of course he doesn't know anything about them. I don't suppose he ever set eyes upon a single one of them in his life."

"Well, he knows what always happens to you when you are in their society."

At this Newbridge seemed to be diverted. "Oh, not

"everything that happens to me, I hope! But if you and he mean that I always drop money in no matter what society, I can't contradict you. Nobody ever had such rotten luck as I have!"

"So you can't be much surprised if he asks what object there is in trying to help you. If he gives you a thousand pounds today, and you lose a thousand to-morrow, who is the better off, except some undeserving third person?"

To this pertinent query no reply was made. The cousins walked on, side by side, through the sunlight and the shade, a comely, high-bred couple who might well have been brother and sister, so strong was their outward resemblance. In character there was no common ground between them; yet they were mutually attached, and had few secrets from one another. At length Newbridge resumed:

"It can't be more beastly for him to be bothered by me than it is for me to have to bother him: but what the deuce is one to do? When all's said and done, he could write me a cheque for three or four times as much as I need and never miss it."

"Yes," the girl agreed quietly.

"Then why can't he be decently civil? Why can't he behave as any other fellow's governor would, and pay up, after grumbling a bit? Why must he grudge me every penny I have to ask him for?"

"He doesn't grudge the money. What he objects to is the way you spend it and the company that you keep."

The young man jerked up his shoulders impatiently. "That's such humbug and hypocrisy! It wouldn't

make the slightest odds to him if I consorted habitually with the Devil and all his angels. What he really would object to would be my keeping the same company as he does ; because then he wouldn't be able to help meeting me."

"Do you think that's quite fair, Newbridge?"

"Absolutely fair. And if it wasn't, I should only be treating him as he has always treated me. You won't pretend that I've had fair play from him, come! I don't set up to be a saint, and I daresay some of my friends are no better than they should be ; but whose fault is that?"

"Chiefly yours, I should think," answered Helen, laughing a little.

"No ; yours and his. Yours rather more than his, if it comes to that ; though I admit that you're not to blame and he is. You might have made me a quiet, respectable, domestic sort of chap. As you wouldn't, or couldn't, I had to look for consolation where it was to be had."

The statement, like most of Newbridge's statements, was a trifle disingenuous. Neither Helen nor any other woman would have had the slightest chance of domesticating him, and if, on her definite refusal to become his wife, he had sought consolation in other quarters, it was not because he had stood in any desperate need of being consoled. At the same time, he had quite honestly wished to marry her, and had probably been as much, or as nearly, in love with her as his nature would allow him to be. Such are the revenges of time. An unconsidered child grows up into an attractive girl, a school-boy developes into a young man peculiarly susceptible

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to feminine charms, and so the tables are turned. After a childish fashion, Helen had certainly been smitten with the good-looking lad whose qualities had struck her as heroic; but the undergraduate, grown deferential and attentive, and the avowedly amorous Guardsman had failed to touch her heart. Long before Newbridge made the formal offer which had been preceded by numerous tacit avowals she had taken his measure and was well aware that there was very little of the hero about him. She was sorry to disappoint him, though sanguine as to his speedy recovery; but, since she did not love him "in that way," disappointment must be his portion.

The strange thing was that his father was more disappointed than he. That Lord Lavernock, with the very low estimate which he held of Newbridge's moral character and the very high value which he placed upon the niece who was as a daughter to him, should wish for an alliance so inexpedient upon the face of it as one between first cousins had been a great surprise to Helen. She set this down to a conviction on his part that she alone was capable of reforming the reprobate; it did not cross her mind that what the old man really longed for was to leave her, when he should die, mistress of his home and hers. In any case, it was not possible for her to marry Newbridge, nor at the age of twenty had she yet experienced an inclination to marry anybody else. Thanks to the kindly exertions of Lady Elizabeth Barton, who had launched her at the proper time upon a wider world, she had received a few proposals; but of these she had made short work. Old for her years, perfectly self-possessed and fit to assume the part which

devolved upon her of playing hostess in St. James's Square, she speedily dispensed with Aunt Elizabeth, who had daughters of her own to establish; but she cared very little for society, and, like her uncle, regarded a few annual months of urban hospitality merely as one amongst many tiresome obligations which attach to rank and wealth. Having accomplished what duty required of them, they were both wont to return with joy to the country abode which they loved and around which all their interests centred. All, that is to say, save one; and the one exception existed rather for Helen than for Lord Lavernock, who candidly owned that the less he heard of Newbridge the better he was pleased. What he did hear about Newbridge was so invariably the reverse of pleasant!

Well, he was going to hear something unpleasant now, either from the young man's own lips or from those of an intermediary. Newbridge was very decidedly of opinion that the occasion called for an intermediary.

"You'll have to see me through, Helen," he said, after some further parley. "I might as well try to draw a badger with my teeth as to tackle him when he has a fit of gout on, and you can put things to him in a way that I can't."

"There's only one way of putting them that I know of," the girl answered. "It's a way that he won't like, and I don't promise that it will succeed. Still, I can but try."

"Oh, *you'll* succeed all right," Newbridge predicted, with a cleared and cheerful countenance: "he doesn't refuse *you* anything you ask for."

"That's just why I oughtn't to ask too much of him."

"Rubbish! As if he hadn't more coin than he knows what to do with! Upon my word, when I think of what my debts amount to and what other fellows owe who haven't anything like my prospects, I remind myself of that old Indian Johnny—what was his name?—who told his judges he stood astounded at his own moderation."

Helen made no rejoinder. She was not given to lecturing, nor would Newbridge ever be made to understand that what he urged was beside the mark. Taking her silence for hesitation, he resumed coaxingly:

"Come, Helen, be a dear and lend me a hand just this once. I'm going to be good and turn over a new leaf; I am really! After all, as I was saying just now, it's owing to you that I've played the ass. I'm sure you must feel that."

Sometimes she felt it in an exaggerated degree. Well though she understood her cousin, she remained fond of him and believed that, after his fitful, egotistical fashion, he was fond of her. Doubtless he would have made what is commonly called a very bad husband; yet, since his will was weak, while hers was strong, she would probably have contrived, as his wife, to keep him out of notorious, ignominious scrapes. Probably, too, it would not have lain beyond her to terminate that estrangement between him and his father which had already been fruitful of evil results and was likely to produce more. Had not her mission in life, perhaps, been to do that very thing? It was not wholly unnatural that a girl so much left to solitary meditation

should ask herself such a question ; but Helen's sound sense had, thus far, always preserved her from answering it in the affirmative. There were many other visible reasons for her existence. However, the rendering of assistance in response to Newbridge's signals of distress seemed to be one of them.

"Did you ever know me refuse to lend you a hand?" she asked. "I'll do my best; nobody can do more. Not that I believe for one moment that you are going to be good."

"Well, I'm like you; I can't do more than I can. But I'm going to be as good as some of my neighbours, and better than most of them."

"You have such a deplorable set of neighbours!"

"That's what I say. It's a naughty world, and really, taking them all round, the women are a lot worse than the men. We should run straight enough if they'd only leave us alone."

"What about leaving them alone?"

"Just what I'm trying to do; only it isn't so awfully easy, you know. One reason why I'm here today is that I wanted to give a certain person the slip."

He proceeded to specify the certain person by name, entering, without apology or embarrassment into details which used not to be considered suitable for the ears of unmarried ladies. But it was his habit to be very frank in regard to such matters with Helen, who indeed knew what everybody at that time (except, perchance, Lord Lavernock) knew, and who, although holding herself leagues apart from the circles which Newbridge frequented, was neither old-fashioned nor prudish.

"That's the way the money goes," was her only comment upon his narrative.

"Some of it; not all. And, as I tell you, I'm chucking her. She's a regular bad lot."

That the lady in question was what he called her nobody who enjoyed the privilege of her intimacy would have been likely to dispute; yet many of them might have thought that by speaking of her in such terms to another woman he brought himself into the same condemnation. There were moments when, from some occult cause, Newbridge, well born, the inheritor of high traditions and refined in personal aspect, showed himself to be not altogether a gentleman. It was perhaps more on that account than on any other that his cousin had felt marriage with him to be out of the question for her.

She parted from him at the main entrance of the house and went straight upstairs to discharge her mission, while he strolled round to the stables. They did not meet again until just before the dinner hour, when she joined him in the library, holding between her finger and thumb an oblong strip of paper which she handed to him silently.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young man, with brightened eyes, after a rapid examination of it, "you are a brick, Helen! I never expected to get more than half. What did he say?"

Helen was looking a little tired. "A good many things which there wouldn't be much use in my repeating," she answered; "and the worst of it is that nearly all of them were true. It doesn't very much

matter what he said, since you have got what you wanted, does it?"

Apparently it did not much matter to Newbridge what she said either; for he accepted this rather unkind speech without any show of resentment, and, formal announcement being then made that dinner was served, the subject dropped.

Dinner at Lavernock House was always a formal, stately function, even when, as was usually the case, only two persons sat down to partake of it. Helen, under whose rule the establishment had been drilled to a high state of perfection, had long ago realised the danger of allowing discipline to be relaxed, and if a score of guests had been sprung upon her at a few hours' notice, nothing would have been wanting to their comfort.

"I must say," Newbridge remarked appreciatively, as he lighted his cigarette after dessert, "that things are jolly well done here. I don't know a house in England where they're better done."

"Then," returned his cousin, "perhaps you will pay us the compliment of staying a little longer than you generally do."

"Oh, I'm afraid I must be off tomorrow morning."

"Without seeing your father?"

The young man's face fell. "I'll see him if you like; but what's the good? Did he say he wanted to see me?"

Lord Lavernock had expressed no such wish—never did express any such wish. The most hopeless feature in the alienation of the father and son was that neither

any longer affected to desire meetings which, to be sure, were seldom productive of anything but gall and bitterness. Without answering the question put to her, Helen said : *

"You might like just to tell him that you're grateful."

"I shouldn't like it a bit. Of course I might tell him so ; only he wouldn't believe it, and it wouldn't be true either."

Newbridge smoked in silence for a minute before adding, "But that doesn't mean that I'm not awfully grateful to you, Helen."

"So much so that you would do me a small favour if I asked you ?"

"Anything in the world that I can do for you, my dear !"

"Drop betting and gambling, then. You yourself say that you invariably lose. And it isn't a case for half measures. You are like one of my poor village tipplers ; with you it must be total abstention or nothing."

Newbridge was much amused. "So that's your notion of a small favour, eh ? Now look here, Helen, I'm sure you wouldn't be so immoral as to advise any man to take the pledge if you knew he was bound to break it. Very well, I won't make a promise which it would be a thousand to one against my keeping. That's honest, anyhow."

The girl sighed. "You will have a great deal of money some day, Newbridge," said she ; "but unless somebody saves you from yourself, you will end in ruin all the same." •

"I shouldn't be surprised. And perhaps, when I do,

you'll be sorry that you, who might have saved me, wouldn't. There's a nasty thing to say!—and I don't want to be nasty. Come out into the garden; it's a ripping night. We'll look at the stars and smell the flowers and make believe that we're little innocents again, as we were once upon a time."

CHAPTER III

BANISHMENT

"My dear child," said Lord Lavernock, "you need not trouble yourself to make excuses for him; I am sure he would not think them necessary. He comes here for a certain purpose. Having attained his object—a little more easily than he expected, perhaps—he naturally takes to his heels. Quite characteristic and quite consistent."

Lord Lavernock, who made bold to think that he himself was consistent if he was anything, could manage to reconcile sincere relief at his son's departure with an aggrieved sense of the latter's cynicism in having so promptly and silently departed.

"Don't you think people are often apt to seem ungracious when the truth is that they are rather ashamed of themselves?" Helen suggested.

"It may be so; although I cannot recall a single occasion on which Newbridge has shown any sign of shame. Moral cowardice, yes; it is highly probable that he would prefer appearing ungracious to hearing the home truths which he would have had to hear if he had seen fit to thank me. After all, I daresay he realised that I was not the person to whom gratitude

was due. Perhaps he had the manners to thank you?"

"Oh, yes," answered Helen, with a sigh, "he thanked me. He was more like his old self last night than I have seen him for a long time. There is a great deal of good in him, you know."

"Well, my dear," said Lord Lavernock, smiling and patting his niece's hand, "I am glad you think so."

He, for his part, could not think so; and that he should still have a hankering after a project of marriage which had completely broken down may have been another instance of his unconscious inconsistency. However, it must be said for him that he had cherished that project in his heart for many years before mention of it had passed his lips. The drawbacks to it were, palpable enough, no doubt; but the advantages were in his view, even more so. Helen had always had considerable power over Newbridge; if anybody could convert that sow's ear into a silk purse, she could; she, if anybody, could restrain him from playing the mischief with a fine property of which she held the manifold strings in her slim, capable fingers. Moreover—and this was what weighed most with the old man—by becoming her cousin's wife she would be spared the wrench and sorrow of eviction. Lord Lavernock was now a very old man. Still active for his years, and able, in the intervals of gout and bronchitis, to enjoy a ride on a quiet cob; but growing more and more infirm, and under no illusion as to his slackening hold upon life. It was not surprising that he should be troubled and anxious about Helen's future; scarcely surprising either that her reason for rejecting Newbridge should strike

him as insufficient. When one has lived between seventy and eighty years in a fickle world, it is difficult to regard being "in love" as the factor of overwhelming import in human careers which it unquestionably is.

Meanwhile, he not unwillingly shelved a subject which, as he had wisdom enough to perceive, was best left upon the knees of the gods. Helen and he had two tranquil, pleasant months together, pottering about the estate, as was their wont, busying themselves with the local events and episodes which interested them and entirely satisfied, as they always were, with one another's company. A certain number of guests had to be invited for the partridge shooting; but these, presenting themselves in successive batches and remaining but a few days in a house which—sport apart—offered no attractions to the gaily inclined, scarcely arrived at being a nuisance. Helen knew just what to do with them and how to prevent them from interfering with her uncle's methodical habits. But with October came trouble, or distant echoes and rumours of it. Helen did not quite understand why there should have been such a fuss because a mare of Newbridge's, starting at an outside price, had won an important race at Newmarket. "Do not outsiders often win races?" she asked. But Lord Lavernock, somewhat better informed, was terribly upset. Certain offensive comments in the sporting papers he might have disregarded; but he felt it as nothing short of a personal disgrace and humiliation that his son should have been requested by the stewards of the Jockey Club to explain the running of the animal in question. Perhaps he attached an exaggerated significance to the incident. The stewards, at all events,

expressed themselves satisfied, and that might have been enough for most people. But it was not at all enough for Lord Lavernock, who declared that he had long dreaded something of this sort.

"Yes, yes, I know he has been whitewashed; that is not the point. Straightforward, honourable men are not called upon to show cause why they should not be warned off Newmarket heath."

There had not been any real danger of resort to such extreme measures; but Lord Lavernock would have it that no other punishment can be inflicted upon dishonest owners, and he hardly disguised his belief that it ought to have been inflicted upon Newbridge. He harped upon the topic and fretted over it until Helen was almost glad to receive a rather urgent appeal from Lady Elizabeth Barton, who wrote from London:

"I wish you wouldn't mind running up for a night. I am afraid your uncle will get into a state of mind about this tiresome business of Newbridge's, and although of course he wouldn't pay the least attention to anything I told him, he might listen to you if you were put *au courant* of the rights and wrongs of the affair. It's really a case of the pot calling the kettle black."

It was a case of much ado about nothing, Helen thought, and she said so immediately after her arrival in South Audley Street, where Mr. Barton's town residence was situated.

"I know very little about racing," she confessed; "but I do know something about the health and moods of horses, and it seems to me ridiculous to expect them to be the same animals on different dates.

According to the papers, Newbridge has quite cleared himself——”

“Good gracious!” interrupted her aunt, “you don’t suppose I wanted to talk to you about *that* old story, ~~do~~ you? I took it for granted that you would have heard of the divorce suit which is just coming on; but it passes belief, the way you and your uncle contrive not to hear of things! You have never so much as heard of that beast of a woman the respondent, I daresay.”

But Helen’s ignorance and detachment were less absolute than that. She could form an accurate guess at the respondent’s identity, and concurred in Lady Elizabeth’s definition of her. Nor did it surprise her to learn that in the forthcoming trial there might easily have been half-a-dozen co-respondents, instead of one.

“It’s dreadful bad luck for poor Newbridge to be made the scapegoat,” Lady Elizabeth went on, in an irritated tone of voice; “but, since he is to be victimised, I really think it would be better not to attempt any defence. The less mud he stirs up the sooner the whole thing will be forgotten.”

There was, it appeared, a large supply of available mud. There were also a great many persons who deserved bespattering, yet whose public discomfiture could avail Newbridge nothing. Lady Elizabeth who had a weakness for her nephew, took the view which a good-natured, tolerant woman of the world generally does take of such imbroglios. She was very sorry for the poor, dear fellow, very angry with the peccant lady, still more angry with the lady’s hitherto quiescent

husband, but above all things anxious to avert a protracted, sensational case. Could not Helen persuade her cousin to give up the idea of defending it?

"What I am thinking of is the effect upon your uncle. He's safe to get into a rage about it, whatever happens; that we can't help. Only if details are to be gone into, there's no telling what he may not say or do. And Newbridge, in his own way, is just as obstinate and tiresome as his father. He will be dining here tonight; do give him some sound advice!"

It was for this purpose, then, that Helen had been summoned. She was not unwilling to lend herself to it, although she at once perceived a possible difficulty to which her aunt had made no allusion. Would the accused lady consent to a course which must finally demolish what remained of her reputation?

"Oh, *she*!" returned Lady Elizabeth, with ineffable disdain; "yes, she'll consent fast enough. She hasn't a leg to stand upon. The most she can hope for is money compensation, and the less said about her in public the more liberally your uncle is likely to treat her. She has the wit to see that, I suspect."

So when she met her cousin that evening, Helen counselled him in the desired sense, with the result that he grimaced, hoisted up his shoulders and said:

"Anything to oblige! I daresay you're right; I dare say it's the most economical plan. Personally, I don't care two straws, one way or the other; only I didn't see the force of caving in to save other people's characters. My own, of course, is past praying for."

It was, perhaps, past redemption in Helen's eyes, although this particular scrape of his did not strike her

as a very bad one. Like Lady Elizabeth, she held the woman chiefly, if not solely, to blame; like Lady Elizabeth, too, she was anxious to spare her uncle, as far as might be, what he was certain to consider a family degradation. The system of ethics which has for its first and great commandment, "Thou shalt not suffer thy vices to be exposed in the newspapers," had never been adopted by Lord Lavernock, whose moral code was of a much more rigid order; yet it was true enough that the voice of the daily press had for him an importance somewhat beyond its intrinsic deserts. "Comes of having once been a Whig statesman," his sister would scornfully remark. "It's a tradition with those people to cringe to public opinion, instead of forming it, as we do on our side."

Well, even the great educator of the Tory party, had he condescended to such small matters, could scarcely have altered the opinion which the British public invariably forms of the co-respondent in a divorce case. Still, there are degrees. Broadly speaking, it is expected of a man thus unhappily placed that he shall not hesitate to perjure himself, and when he does so hesitate, enhanced respect is not likely to be his reward. That aspect of the situation may not have presented itself to Lady Elizabeth Barton, but Helen, after listening to some avowals from Newbridge of which the frankness left nothing to be desired, proved her dissimilarity to the British public at large by pointing out that what he had told her left him no option but to act as he was advised. She did not see how it was possible for a gentleman to swear to a lie.

"Oh, I'm prepared to take either line," Newbridge

owned, laughing. "I can't really choose at all. I can only suggest that the thing should be allowed to go undefended, and I fancy the suggestion will find favour. If it doesn't, I can't help it."

Lady Elizabeth was very well satisfied with that attitude, which seemed to her absolutely correct. She had little control over her nephew, with whose uncertain temper and frequent petulance she found it difficult to deal; so that she was all the more grateful to Helen for having brought him to a reasonable frame of mind. Helen, she had noticed, always could and always did bring him to reason. It was a thousand pities that a match which had so much to recommend it should have miscarried. However, if Newbridge was hard to control, Helen was impossible. The only thing to be done was to utilise the girl for such good objects as she would agree to further, and of these, to do her justice, there were not a few.

To keep the peace between her uncle and her cousin was an object to which Helen was ever ready to devote her best energies; but in this instance she could not do a great deal, because Lord Lavernock was antiquated enough to deem breaches of the seventh commandment unfit for mention or discussion by unmarried women. Therefore, when the news of his son's latest escapade came to his ears, he was not only very angry but alarmingly reticent. Helen's tentative plea of extenuating circumstances brought down upon her the nearest approach to a snub of which her uncle was capable where she was concerned.

"I must beg you to say no more, my dear. You know many things, but upon matters of this sort you are, and

must be, completely ignorant, thank God! You evidently do not understand that what has happened can only mean irreparable disaster for Newbridge, quite apart from any personal annoyance or disgust that it may cause me."

She certainly did not understand that; nor did Lady Elizabeth; least of all did Newbridge himself. The latter, to be sure, did know that certain impudent demands would be made upon him; but he had no intention whatsoever of complying with them, no faintest suspicion that his father, of all people in the world, would hold him bound to do so. When the decree *nisi* had been pronounced, after a brief hearing which sadly disappointed the curious, he travelled down to Lavernock, in obedience to imperative orders, and, as usual, contrived to see Helen before facing the more formidable interview which could not be evaded this time.

"What's the weather forecast?" he jocularly inquired. "Any signs of an approaching cyclonic disturbance?"

"I hardly know what to make of him," Helen confessed somewhat uneasily. "He has said almost nothing, but he looks very grave and worried."

"Dull, with a threatening appearance and a falling glass, eh? There'll be a whole gale, I expect. Well, it's true that I'm here to raise the wind."

Lord Lavernock, seated at a massive writing-table in the library, rose slowly, when his son and heir was shown into his presence, and pointed to a chair facing him.

"Painful and disagreeable things," he began, "are

best said in as few words as may be. I had already heard something of the character and antecedents of this—person whose husband you have compelled to divorce her, and further inquiries which I have recently made have more than confirmed the very bad impression that I had formed of her. I am sorry to be obliged to tell you that I can never receive her here or elsewhere.”

A fugitive mental picture of his father receiving the lady alluded to brought an involuntary smile to Newbridge's lips which he hastened to smooth away with his hand. “What do you take me for?” he protested. “Need I say that I never dreamt of asking you to speak to her? I should as soon think of asking the Archbishop of Canterbury to meet her at tea.”

Lord Lavernock surveyed the speaker grimly. He detested levity; but he was aware that his son had a small vocabulary and limited methods of rendering himself articulate. It was something, at any rate, that the justice and necessity of an irrevocable decision should be recognised; so he proceeded, in slightly milder accents:

“I fear I must add that the prohibition will have to apply also to you.”

“Do you mean that you forbid me the house?” asked Newbridge, staring.

“What else can I do?” his father inquired. “Most men, I should imagine, would not care to enter a house which was closed against their wives.”

“Oh, I see! But it isn't so bad as that, you'll be glad to hear. Of course I'm not going to marry the woman.”

“The woman expects you to marry her, I presume?”

"She has the cheek to say so. I don't suppose that in reality she expects anything of the sort. She hasn't the ghost of a case—no promise, written or verbal. In short, I should say that she could be squared for a few thousands. Say five thousand. That would be doing her handsomely."

Lord Lavernock's expression of mingled repugnance and incredulity might have interested or amused a physiognomist. It said very little to his son, who misinterpreted it so completely as to add :

"Five thousand sounds rather a lot, I know ; but I fancy you'd rather pay up than have a row, wouldn't you ?"

"Are you inviting me," Lord Lavernock asked, in a voice like the growling of distant thunder, "to release you by a money payment from the most elementary obligation of honour ? If so, you demand what neither I nor any other human being can give you. You must marry the woman whom you have ruined ; there is no possible way of escape from that necessity."

He really thought so. The young man's irrepressible outburst of laughter shocked and angered him, but no more caused him to change his mind than did an ironical request for his definition of ruin in that connection. As he saw things, the character of the lady was altogether irrelevant to the issue. Ill fortune for the man who had chanced to be selected as co-respondent ? Possibly ; but one must accept the recognised and traditional consequences of one's actions, whether one relishes them or not. It was vain to represent to Lord Lavernock that there are exceptions to every rule ; there are, on the contrary, he said, several rules which

have none. An altercation ensued, in the course of which the young man's temper got the better alike of his prudence and his fears.

"No, I don't," he declared at length, in answer to a point-blank question of whether he meant to "do his duty" or not. "I am not going to behave like a lunatic—and, what's more, you can't make me."

There was a pause of perhaps a minute; after which Lord Lavernock stood up.

"Then," he announced, "I have done with you. I cannot, as you truly say, make you behave like a man of honour; I cannot prevent you from disgracing your name and mine. But I can, and do, forbid you to show your face here again while I live."

"You're rather difficult to please," observed Newbridge, with a sneer. "I'm forbidden the house if I marry, and forbidden it if I don't. Well, at least that leaves me free to take my choice."

"You have made it, as I gather. I have nothing further to add, except that the pecuniary claim of which you spoke just now shall be met on my receiving an intimation from my lawyers that it will be accepted. I shall be obliged if you yourself will in future address me—should you have occasion to do so—through the same channel. Letters in your handwriting, sent directly to me, will be returned unopened."

Now it is probable that most people would consider this rather hard measure. As a fact, most people did so consider it. Certainly traditions of the nature specified by Lord Lavernock do exist; but if ever there was an instance in which departure from them appeared to be justified, this was one. In the sequel, Newbridge

was not universally cut, as his father had fully expected him to be, nor did the Colonel of his battalion request him to send in his papers. To the latter the old man actually wrote, saying that he did not wish his own position, or the services which he had rendered to his country (he had out-of-date and rather pathetic notions respecting the magnitude of both), to be taken into account in determining the treatment to be meted out to his son. He presumed that the Colonel would agree with him in deeming any man who declined to make the only possible reparation to a woman whom he had wronged, guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. He would, therefore, be glad to hear whether steps had been taken, or were about to be taken, to deprive his son of the privilege of any longer wearing His Majesty's uniform.

In reply to the above Brutus-like missive, Lieutenant-Colonel Julyan presented his compliments to the Earl of Lavernock, and begged to say that he had not felt it his duty to urge or suggest Viscount Newbridge's retirement from the Army. With regard to the general question raised in Lord Lavernock's letter, he would only take leave to observe that, in his judgment, the principle was not one of invariable and indiscriminate application.

Lord Lavernock thought this impertinent. He also ascertained, or said he had done so, that Colonel Julyan was himself a man of lax morals who would be naturally and discredibly in sympathy with fellow offenders. However that might be, his own course was perfectly clear to him, and nothing that Helen could say availed to divert him from it. After all, the mere fact that her cousin had been warned off premises which he so very

seldom invaded made little more than a nominal change in the position of affairs. What did distress her was that Newbridge had flung out of the house in a pettish rage, vowing that a hypocritical pretext had been seized upon to get rid of him, and adding that if, after this, he went to the devil, it would be she just as much as his father who would have driven him there. She wrote to him several times, but, receiving no answer, had to comfort herself with the conviction that he would forget his wrath and come back to her, as heretofore, the next time he found himself in difficulties.

CHAPTER IV

THE INHERITANCE

It may be conjectured that Lord Lavernock felt no great respect or commiseration for the lady who took his money with avidity, and who speedily espoused an admirer more scrupulous or less capable of resistance than Newbridge. But he observed that two blacks do not make a white, and begged that the whole affair might be relegated to the category of matters judged. Perhaps he was unjust; perhaps (though this is not likely) he knew he was. In either case, there were reasons for leaving him in peace, the first and chief of which was that he was perceptibly failing. All through the winter he was more or less confined to his room, and although he seemed to revive with the advent of spring, he had to confess himself unable any longer to mount a horse or walk further than a mile. He said nothing about the usual move to London, and Helen was not sorry that it should be tacitly abandoned; for she had been dreading some chance meeting between him and his son which could only have served to advertise their severance.

The shadow of her impending loss, as to which she made no attempt to deceive herself, lay heavily upon

her during the long summer months which she spent, with scarcely a day's intermission, in the company of the old man who was not less dear to her than she was to him. From her childhood up she had been solitary, and had never repined at her solitude, or thought of herself as strangely detached from those of her own generation. But now that her one friend was about to leave her, there came to her for the first time that appalling sense of being quite alone which most of us have to face at one time or another of our lives, though few at so early a period as she. For such desolation there is no remedy, unless it be the complete, unaffected, unreserved surrender of self, and Helen Monk was scarcely of those who can find their happiness in convents or in devotion to the human race at large.

She was, however, an unselfish person in the ordinary acceptance of the term, and she proved it by always exhibiting a cheerful countenance to the old man, who was himself cheerful and contented enough. He was not definitely ill; he liked the sunshine, liked afternoon drives with Helen, liked her to read the papers to him in the evening, and often dropped off to sleep while she was doing so. His slowly decaying brain refused to occupy itself with what was painful or distasteful; the small details of daily life gave it as much as it could grasp. Only once in the course of those months did he refer to his son, and then without any special animosity.

"An extravagant, incapable fellow, Newbridge," he said, shaking his head. "Always was and always will be. You can't trust him with money—can't trust him. I have left as much as I could to you, my dear; it was the only safe plan."

Then he seemed on a sudden to forget the subject, and did not recur to it; but those few words of his, spoken in apparent oblivion of recent occurrences, disquieted Helen a little. Did they mean that he had not even yet relinquished all hope of her becoming Newbridge's wife? She would have liked to tell him once more and most emphatically that that could never be; but he gave her no opportunity.

It was not until late in the autumn that what visibly announced itself as the last stage began. One morning Lord Lavernock did not come down to breakfast. There was nothing serious the matter, he told Helen; but he assented without demur to the suggestion of the doctor, who was sent for, that he should remain quietly in his own room for the present. The doctor was also of opinion that there was nothing serious the matter—yet.

“At the same time, we have to remember his age and his decreasing vitality. Pray don't imagine that I wish to alarm you, Miss Monk; only if there is anybody whom you think he would like to see; any near relation——”

The doctor hesitated; for the split between Lord Lavernock and his heir was no secret to the neighbourhood. Helen, however, did not hesitate. To send for the banished Newbridge without permission was impossible; to ask permission would be as much as to tell the old man in so many words that he was dying; and this she could not bring herself to do. By way of compromise, she sent for Lady Elizabeth Barton, who reached the house, accompanied by her husband, twenty-four hours later, and who quite agreed that so long as there was no imminent danger, the best

plan was to ignore the patent fact that there soon would be.

"If anything could make your poor dear uncle more irreconcilable than he is, it would be the idea that we wanted to thrust a death-bed reconciliation upon him," she shrewdly remarked.

Lord Lavernock was not yet confined to his bed, nor did he seem to think himself confronted by death. He sat in his chair by the fireside all day long, talking little, complaining of no pain or discomfort, and issuing occasional orders and instructions the gist of which he was apt to forget before he was half way through them. His physical outlasted his mental powers, and at length Helen was forced to that saddest of all admissions, that virtual death had come while life persisted. She would gladly have got rid of the Bartons, who wanted to go, and who, kind as they meant to be, evidently could not believe that an event so inevitable and so tardy in its incidence would leave her disconsolate.

"Of course, you know, my dear Helen," said plump, rosy Mr. Barton, "I should like to get away if I could. I'm rather busy, and—and there's no telling how long this may go on. Still I quite see that somebody ought to be with you when—er—the end comes."

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The Right Honourable John Barton was now Secretary of State for the Colonies, having arrived at that dignity after many years of devoted service to his party. He was a safe, sensible, mediocre man, socially prominent and fairly well off, though not quite as well off as he would have liked to be. Perhaps he wondered whether there would be any pickings for his wife when

"the end" came. If Heaven had not granted Helen a singularly serene temper, he would have tried her patience a good deal during those dark days when he and her aunt scarcely concealed their own lack of that quality.

"No change?" Lady Elizabeth would ask expectantly at breakfast every morning, and would receive the invariable reply with a sigh which was almost equivalent to a reproach.

At last, however, on a dull November day the change came. There was now no question as to the advisability of summoning the heir; for Lord Lavernock had fallen into unconsciousness and was pronounced to be sinking rapidly. Helen did not even know Newbridge's whereabouts; but his aunt, better informed, despatched a telegram to the house in Norfolk where he was at that time staying as one of a large shooting party, and late the same night he arrived—only to learn that he had been Earl of Lavernock for three hours and that his instructions with regard to the funeral arrangements were awaited.

His instant reply was that Miss Monk's wishes must be consulted as to that and everything else. Helen, pale, but quite composed, had met him in the hall, and soon he was alone with her in what had been his father's study, where they sat down and surveyed one another for a moment in silence. The new Lord Lavernock was evidently nervous.

"You won't expect me to say that I'm grieved," he began, with a half laugh. "All the same, this has given me a bit of a knock. I wish to the Lord I had known——!"

"Would you have come if you had known that he was ill?" asked Helen quickly.

"Well no; I don't suppose I should have done that. I couldn't very well have come without being called, could I? But somehow—it sounds absurd to say so, though it's true—I never thought of his dying. He was the sort of tough old chap who might have gone on living, in spite of the gout, for ever."

"He has been dying for months," said Helen sadly. "I thought of letting you know; but then—I doubted."

"Oh, the odds are that I shouldn't have believed you. I didn't want to see him any more than he wanted to see me. The last time we parted I knew well enough that it was going to be the last time; only, as I say, I didn't foresee——"

"You took no notice of my letters," Helen resumed, by way of excusing herself. Then she went on to essay excuses for the dead man. "I don't think he was really as unforgiving as he tried to make himself out; it was more that he was in such constant dread of your getting into fresh trouble and that he fancied harshness was his only weapon or shield. How can one tell what is in other people's hearts? All I know is that there never was a kinder heart than his. He spoke of you not so long ago with a sort of wistfulness, it seemed to me."

But her cousin was not listening to her. He fidgetted about the room, frowning and gnawing his upper lip, as he had a trick of doing when perplexed or annoyed. She soon had to recognise that, whatever he might regret, it was not the lost opportunity to make friends with one who, to tell the truth, had given him small proofs of friendship.

"Well," he observed abruptly, "what's done can't be undone. I've come into my own, anyhow, if that's a thing to be glad of."

Helen winced inwardly, but not outwardly. It would not, she surmised, take a great deal to estrange her cousin from her permanently, and such estrangement she was determined to avert, were it but for his own sake. That he would want her help and advice before very long she did not doubt. So all she said was :

"It is a splendid inheritance."

"Well, I don't know so much about that. There's plenty of splendour, supposing one cared for that sort of thing ; but the death duties will be pretty heavy, I presume, and I owe a devil of a lot. I hope I get a liberal supply of cash, that's all !"

In spite of old Lord Lavernock's statement—to which, for the rest, she had attached only a limited significance—Helen took it for granted that her cousin would come into ample available funds. Having for years practically controlled her uncle's local affairs, she knew that he had lived well within his income and must have died extremely rich. What it had never entered into her head to imagine was that he had deliberately heaped up riches for her benefit. It was, therefore, with amazement and dismay that she listened to the will which was read aloud by Mr. Blandford, the family lawyer, in that same room a few days later. There were numerous charitable bequests ; there were substantial, if not very imposing, legacies, to "my sister Elizabeth Barton" and others ; but the house in St. James's Square, together with the entire residue of the personal estate, was devised to "my dear niece Helen Monk absolutely."

The furniture at Lavernock House and the pictures, plate, horses and carriages went with the title, but literally not one shilling of money!

It was an outrageous testament. Everybody thought so, from Mr. Barton, who could not help murmuring audibly, "Oh, come! really you know—too bad!" down to the most distant collateral, who, getting nothing at all, was in a position to form a dispassionate judgment. Even Mr. Blandford, the amiable, white-haired lawyer, had the air of being ashamed of it and of wishing to intimate that his late client had not acted upon any advice of his. A will, however, is a will, and, notwithstanding some subsequent remarks of Mr. Barton's, there could be no serious question of setting this one aside. It had been executed at a time when the testator was known to have been in full possession of his faculties, and as for undue influence, nobody hinted or believed that the chief beneficiary had brought that to bear upon him.

That Helen found herself a great heiress with the most unfeigned regret was, indeed, manifest, although she said little. Her common sense told her at once that there was little or nothing to be said. She thought she knew what her uncle's intention had been—an intention against which her impulse was strongly to rebel—but she also knew that an immediate offer to resign her inheritance in her cousin's favour could not possibly be accepted and would only sound like a cheap bid for general admiration. The situation was defined and, for the time being, unalterable; how to deal with it she must decide later. •

Lavernock (to give him the name by which he was

henceforth to be known), behaved better than might have been expected of him, and perhaps better than most men would have behaved in his very unenviable plight.

“Rather a facer,” he frankly admitted; “but that’s what it was meant to be, I suppose. Relieves me of all obligation to resign my commission and live down here, anyhow—which is something. Of course I shall have to let the place. Now, Helen, what offers? I should think you could very well afford to be my tenant and pay me a decent rent.”

Mr. Blandford, on being consulted, gave it as his opinion that such an arrangement would not be beyond the compass of Miss Monk’s means, although he was unable, upon the spur of the moment, to give precise figures. Mr. Blandford probably divined what was beginning to dawn upon Mr. Barton, what had instantly struck Lady Elizabeth, and what Helen herself would fain have doubted, but could not. Supposing that the late Lord Lavernock had desired to safeguard the future and yet refrain from punishing his heir more severely than was necessary, the measure which he had taken—aided by the provisions of the Married Women’s Property Act—was not so badly imagined. It depended for its success, to be sure, upon the willingness of two young people who had been very nearly engaged once upon a time to revert to bygone conditions; but was there any valid reason in the world why they should not so revert? Lady Elizabeth, at all events, could see none. She was even ill-advised enough to speak to her niece upon the subject that evening.

“At the first moment one was a little bit shocked;

but now one sees that everything can be adjusted quite easily, and really it's just as well that the poor fellow should be prevented from playing ducks and drakes with his father's money. He's very fond of you, Helen, and you needn't tell me that you aren't fond of him, because I know better."

"I have always been fond of him," Helen answered. "It doesn't follow that I should be forced to marry him."

"My dear, nobody can force you to marry him, and I am sure nobody will try; but I should think you would feel——"

"I don't quite know yet how I feel about it, Aunt Elizabeth," interrupted Helen, in that quietly resolute tone of voice with which Lady Elizabeth had cause to be familiar. "I have been placed in this dilemma without my consent and very much against my wish. I perfectly understand it; so that talking about it won't help or influence me at all. I must have time—perhaps rather a long time—to think it over. Meanwhile, he hasn't proposed to me, and I hope he won't."

He was not so precipitately audacious. Before he left, the next morning, she had a short talk with him in which he not only made no proposal but emphatically declined one which she had thought that she might, under the circumstances, venture to put forward.

"Not one penny!—thanks, all the same. I'm anything that anybody likes to call me; but I don't sponge upon women. When all's said and done, there ought to be a considerable income arising out of the estates. I daresay I shall pull through, and, between ourselves, it will be pretty much the same thing to me if I don't.

The last time I was down here I told you I was going to the devil, didn't I? Well, it looks to me as if I had uncommonly nearly got there."

"What do you mean?" asked Helen apprehensively.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, never mind! I was a bit ruffled then; I'm not ruffled now. And look here, Helen; we're friends again, aren't we?"

"As if I had ever wanted to be anything else!"

"That's all right. I know well enough that you never wanted what has come to you, and, if you'll believe me, I don't grudge you your luck. For some reasons, things are really best as they are."

Now, the above sentiments may have done credit to young Lord Lavernock's temper and philosophy, but they certainly did not tend to make his cousin's position more tolerable for her.

CHAPTER V

A RETIRED COMBATANT

IN the early eighties, when Ralph Julyan was a gay and handsome young Guardsman, some lady asked him what he would choose for himself if it were given to him to shape his own future. His modest reply was, "Three thousand a year, the command of the battalion, the V.C., and my liberty." He added that by the last word he meant preservation from the shoals and quicksands of matrimony, avowing thus early in life tenets which were to earn for him later the reputation of a cynic. He himself was wont to declare that the ladies had undertaken his education too early and with too much thoroughness to leave him any of the illusions which he would personally have loved to cherish. Also he professed that his devotion to the sex as a whole refused to be confined within the narrow limits of a selfish system of monogamy; and it is not to be denied that for very many years he displayed a most generous devotion to the sex as a whole. For the rest, he obtained, in due course, all the objects of his not over extravagant ambition, save one. By the time that he had reached what in these days is scarcely accounted middle age his income was slightly above the

amount which he had specified, he commanded the first battalion of the Fusilier Guards, he was an unassailable bachelor, and if the glory of wearing the V.C. had been denied to him, that was only because no opportunity of acquiring it had come his way. As partial consolation, South Africa had brought him a C.B. and a D.S.O.

To find, after getting what you wanted, that fruition falls sadly below the level of expectation is, of course, no uncommon experience; but it may be hoped that not many men, standing on that watershed which definitely marks the culminating point of life's journey, survey the past and the future with such profound dissatisfaction as did Colonel Julyan when the time came for him to give up soldiering and take leave of the juniors with whom he had made himself so popular. Popularity is well enough, if it has been legitimately won; but the Colonel, who had a disastrous habit of seeing things as they are, could not flatter himself that his was in any way the result of having set an edifying example. The youngsters who liked him because he was so likeable would doubtless have described him, with a laugh and a shake of their heads, as "an awful old rascal, you know," and he would have been the first to admit the accuracy of the description. His triumphs—his very numerous triumphs—had not been of the order which would have qualified him to compete for the Prix Monthyon; except in the matter of military duties, as to which he was strict and keen, he had neither prescribed nor pursued a lofty standard; he had been, and still was, a terrible gambler. He had, in a word, wasted his life, and the worst of it was that he knew he had. With abilities above the average and

with tastes, literary and artistic, which he had found little leisure to cultivate, he was now in the unhappy position of having plenty of time to consecrate to them, but of being handicapped by habits which one does not shake off on the downhill road. After all, he would have done more wisely to marry and to be provided with the sons and daughters whose mission it is at once to worry, soothe and occupy the declining years of their progenitors. Many lady friends of his urged him even now to take that step. His curly hair might be grizzled, but he was still extremely good-looking; he was trim, slim and active; nobody would ever dream of calling him an old man. Nothing—so his counsellors averred—would be easier for him than to discover some charming partner to dwell with him in his retirement. But he said he was not such an ass as that. He really could not bring himself to espouse a woman of his own age, and he knew better than to wed a girl. Oh, yes; he was aware that the thing had been done over and over again, and had appeared to turn out admirably; but that was only because people who have essayed the impossible shrink from admitting their failure.

Very likely he was right. In any case, he perceived that what he had to face was increasing solitude, and that what he had better do was to break, as far as might be, with existing associations. For he did not want to become a slave to bridge, if he could help it. So, after the hilarious valedictory dinner at which he was entertained by young Lord Lavernock and others, he betook himself to Italy, thinking that it would be something to do to pick up objects of art for the adornment of the riverside cottage near Maidenhead

which he purposed to make more and more his home. After a time the seductions of Monte Carlo proved greater than those of the vendors of antiques; but then, a little ashamed of having yielded to a temptation of which he wished to believe that he was master, he reverted to less vulgarised and sophisticated regions, endeavouring—not altogether successfully—to persuade himself that he could enjoy for long spells what he was able without any effort at all to enjoy for a few days.

It was in the spring of the year that, having drifted from Ravenna to Padua and from Padua to Venice, he was dining with some acquaintances at a restaurant when his eye, always appreciative of feminine charms, was attracted by two ladies who, as they passed the table on their way out, bowed to his companions.

"Who," he inquired, "is that divinely majestic being?"

"If you mean the roundabout, yellow-haired one," answered the lady to whom his question was addressed, "she is Miss Bligh. There's quite a spice of majesty about Miss Bligh at times; but I don't know that I ever heard her called divine before."

"I feel sure that you never did and never will," said Julian, laughing. "Not by me, anyhow; Miss Bligh doesn't excite my curiosity. But her friend does."

"And you actually don't know the divine Helen by sight!—you who, I thought, knew everybody who was anybody. Helen Monk is very much somebody nowadays—the cousin and supplanter of poor young Lord Lavernock, whom of course you know."

Colonel Julian raised his eyebrows. "So that is the heiress! There was a rumour that the old man

meant her to marry her cousin, and that he thought he had done a clever thing in leaving the money to her. He must have been a very silly old man. I remember his writing me an extraordinarily silly letter on one occasion. Of course she won't marry his son. She hasn't the face of a fool."

He was introduced to her, at his own request, the next day on the Piazza San Marco, and a very few minutes of conversation with her sufficed to convince him that her countenance was a trustworthy witness. She had plenty to say for herself, this beautiful, self-possessed Miss Monk, and what she had to say was pleasant to listen to because it was so sincere, so simple, so unlike the slangy chatter of the average highly born, well-dowered young lady. Helen was, in fact, what her rather peculiar training and manner of life had made her. After a sort of detached fashion she was conversant with the world and its ways; but she had never really belonged to it, she was strangely inexperienced, and with regard to a vast range of subjects she had the ignorance and the eager curiosity of a child. This was, for instance, the very first time that she had been out of her native land, and the weeks that she had been spending in Rome, Naples and Florence had brought her a long succession of overpowering, delightful revelations.

"That doesn't mean that I understand much beyond what is obvious," she confessed—"the exquisite buildings and the colour and atmosphere and all. I lose a great deal through not having had any education in art. Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment' says nothing to me, and when I can honestly admire an old master, as occasionally happens, I feel quite proud of myself. If some of them

were new masters, I am afraid I should think their figures out of drawing and their compositions absurd."

"So they are," said Colonel Julyan.

"Yes; but it's evident from the way you speak that you appreciate them and that you could explain why, if you thought it worth while."

He thought it would be very well worth while to take what sounded not unlike a hint. He had for many years been an unostentatious connoisseur; he knew his Venice pretty thoroughly, and what was to hinder him from placing himself at the disposal of two ladies who knew no more than guide-books and *ciceroni* could tell them? Nothing that they were aware of, anyhow. His offer to assume the part of a modest, but not wholly incompetent showman was gratefully accepted, and in the course of a few days he grew far more intimately acquainted with Miss Monk and her companion than he would have been in a year, had he met them first in London.

"I like that man. Yes I distinctly like him," was Miss Bligh's emphatic verdict on the evening of the fourth day.

When Miss Bligh made up her mind about a person, she seldom changed it. She had made up her mind about Helen Monk some ten years back, and, on ceasing to be her governess, had by no means ceased to be her faithful and devoted friend. It was only natural that Helen, when she found herself alone in the world, should think of Susan Bligh as a possible companion, and at the first word from her former pupil Miss Bligh joyfully threw over the cantankerous old lady who had engaged her in that capacity. Eupeptic, stoutish and blessed

with that species of prettiness which survives the passing of youth, Miss Bligh was probably as suitable an associate as could have been discovered for a great heiress who was disposed to take her manifold duties and responsibilities gravely. Miss Bligh's sensible view was that when you have any amount of money, together with striking personal advantages, you ought at least to show common gratitude to Providence by enjoying yourself. You cannot be merry when you have just lost the one human being whom you have loved with your whole heart? Well, not exactly merry, perhaps; but you need not mope, and you may as well recognise soon as late that the world (a world in which every dog has his day), is a most excellent place of sojourn for some of its inhabitants. It was she who had proposed that Italian journey which had not only gone far towards enforcing the philosophy which she desired to inculcate but had been productive of immense pleasure to herself. She would, in case of need, have been a watchful and efficient sheep-dog; but Helen was too unapproachable by strangers to require protection, and indeed Colonel Julyan was the only man she had met in the course of her travels who had seemed to make any sort of headway with her. It appeared, moreover, that Colonel Julyan had not yet succeeded in winning her entire confidence.

"I fancy he is on his good behaviour," she remarked. "From what I hear, his behaviour hasn't always been good."

"If I were to come across a man—but I'm very sure I never shall—whose behaviour had always been good," returned Miss Bligh, "I shouldn't wish to pursue the

acquaintance further. I've no fancy for freaks outside of travelling shows. You may take my word for it that Colonel Julyan is a decent enough man, as men go."

"Oh, I daresay he is," answered Helen, who, with her chin on her hand, was gazing out of the window at the moonlit surface of the Grand Canal and the shining dome of Santa Maria della Salute beyond. The subject did not seem to interest her much. Presently, however, she recurred to it.

"It is one thing to sow wild oats in your youth," said she, "and rather a different one to go on in the same way after your hair is grey. Newbridge was in Colonel Julyan's battalion, you know, and——"

"Oh, my dear," interrupted Miss Bligh, "if you imagine that the saintliest colonel on earth would have induced that precious cousin of yours to run straight, you little know him!"

"And what do you know about him, Susie?" inquired Helen, smiling.

"What do I know about him? Didn't I know him when he was a boy just as well as I knew you? Haven't I kept my ears open and read the papers since he came to man's estate? It's no use, Helen; you can't make black white, and you'll never make Lord Lavernock into anything but what his father had the wisdom to see that he was. And, in my opinion, your poor uncle never did a wiser thing than when he deliberately put his money out of that spendthrift's reach."

"That may be; but——"

"There isn't any 'but.' Your uncle intended you and you only, to inherit his fortune."

"So you have told me once or twice before."

"And so I shall go on telling you until I get your head clear of fantastic delusions."

Helen rose, laughing. "I'm going to bed," said she; "I don't think reiteration helps much to clear one's head. You're a dear, good soul, Susie; but unfortunately you don't understand."

"In other words, 'Shut up!'" Miss Bligh remarked. "Well, then, I *won't* shut up."

But she did. Authoritative though she was, she always had to yield to her calmly determined friend, and there were moments when she almost despaired of averting a calamity which, should it ever come to pass, would, she declared, go near to breaking her heart. Not being very discreet, she could not refrain from broaching the topic to Colonel Julyan on the following day, when she was seated beside him in a gondola and gliding smoothly towards the distant lagoon which he had decreed that Miss Monk must visit before leaving Venice. He had likewise decreed that Miss Monk should take the lead in a gondola alone; because only in that way, he averred, could the unique charm of the locality be assimilated. Thus, as the victim of the above self-denying ordinance, he had for partner the talkative Miss Bligh—whom, for that matter, he liked well enough, and who, after some prefatory manœuvres, made known to him what was on her mind.

"Yes," he said; "there was talk of that before I left England; I daresay the old man may have had some such intention. But really I don't think you need be alarmed. It won't happen."

"Don't you be too sure," returned Miss Bligh. "I

can tell you that I should be very much alarmed indeed if I thought old Lord Lavernock had intended Helen to marry his good-for-nothing son. But of course I don't think so, and I hope to goodness you won't go saying anything of the sort to her."

Julyan smiled. "From what I have seen of Miss Monk," he answered, "I should doubt her giving a casual acquaintance any chance of speaking to her about her private affairs."

"Oh, she may. You call yourself casual; but we *have* seen a good deal of you this last week, and you and she seem to hit it off together. Then her cousin was under your command; so it isn't the least unlikely that she may question you about him."

"In that case, I must respectfully decline to answer."

"Why? Because you couldn't give a good report of him?"

"It isn't my business to give any report of him. Besides, I should think Miss Monk ought to be nearly as well informed as I am."

"She ought to be; I'm afraid she isn't. And supposing she were, it wouldn't follow that she would give up her fixed idea that it is her mission in life to marry and reform him."

"All the more reason for my holding my tongue. But is that her fixed idea?"

Miss Bligh jerked up her plump shoulders impatiently. "It's too silly! But the more one reasons with her the more she won't listen. You know what women are."

"I have had occasional opportunities of studying them," said Colonel Julyan, with much modesty.

"They aren't all made after the same pattern, are they?"

"They are all unreasonable—all except here and there a one, like your humble servant. And they all have a profound contempt for one another's judgment. They are pretty apt to believe what men tell them, though. I wish you would tell Helen the truth about young Lavernock."

Colonel Julyan laughed and shook his head. "No, thank you; it would be open to him to retaliate by telling the truth about me, which I might not like. Really I think you had better rely upon Miss Monk's own common sense."

He was volubly assured that Helen possessed every good quality under the sun save the one for which he gave her credit, and various episodes of her childhood were adduced to prove that she was a great deal more romantic than she looked; but perhaps his thoughts had wandered away, for he made no further response. The gondola in which he and his loquacious neighbour were reclining had by this time arrived at a seemingly limitless expanse of turquoise-blue water which, without a ripple on its glassy surface, stretched away until it lost itself in a sky of the same hue. Far astern the towers and domes of Venice glistened faintly in a golden haze; but ahead there was not even a sail to interfere with the impression of azure space. Only in the immediate foreground a succession of black stakes, marking out a channel, rose against the blue, their reflections wavering with the rise and fall of a barely perceptible swell. Helen, who had made her boatmen halt, looked back and called out to Colonel Julyan:

"Thank you; you were absolutely right to send me on alone. I've seen and felt it all. It isn't like anything else that ever was!"

"It's like something," said Miss Bligh, straightening herself up and bringing a critical eye to bear upon the prospect. "Oh, yes, I know!—it's like one of Whistler's pictures. Also rather like a barcarolle of Rubinstein's. Well, it's not bad of its kind, I must say, and very likely I should have felt it too if Colonel Julyan hadn't been talking to me. I think we'll change places going back, Helen, so that I may have my turn at taking things in through the pores."

For this was to be their last day in Venice, and the worthy woman had hoped that Colonel Julyan, notwithstanding his disclaimer, might have a word or two of information or wise advice to impart to one who badly needed both. But Helen, leaning over the side of the gondola and absently drawing her slim fingers through the water, did not notice the suggestion.

"I wish," she sighed, "we could go on doing this every afternoon until we were tired of it! I wish we hadn't railway trains and tourists and noise and dust before us, with London at the end!" Then she gave a sudden cry—"Oh, my bangle!"

It had slipped over her wrist, and she saw it sink, a diminishing circlet, into depths whence—so the regretful, sympathising gondoliers declared—there was no chance of recovering it. Possibly, if they had had a diver in the party—but, as ill luck would have it, not one of them could even swim.

"I am sorry," said Colonel Julyan, "that I can't take

twenty years off my age or a few fathoms off the depth of the water."

"Even if you could," observed the practical Miss Bligh, "you would still have to take all your clothes off your body, which would be hardly decent."

Colonel Julyan was watching Helen's distressed face. "Was it a very precious possession?" he asked.

"It was rather," she answered; "my uncle gave it me on my birthday ages ago. Well, I must look upon it as a parting gift to the Adriatic. Perhaps, like the Doge's ring, it may form a link between me and these waters, and bring me back to them some day."

It was never Helen's custom to make a fuss over her misfortunes, small or great. On the return journey, which the gondolas, in compliance with her instructions, performed abreast, she took her fair share in an intermittent conversation, and at a farewell dinner that evening, when she warmly thanked Colonel Julyan for having given her such a charming excursion to finish up with, she betrayed neither by word nor look how dearly she felt it to have been purchased by the loss of an ornament which had cherished associations for her.

This was commendable conduct, and perhaps the surprise which awaited her on the following morning may be regarded as its just reward. For as she and Miss Bligh, in their travelling garb, emerged upon the steps of the hotel, where a small gathering of acquaintances had assembled to take leave of them, Colonel Julyan advanced, saying quietly:

"Here is your bangle." •

She took it from him with an exclamation of joy

and amazement. "Oh, but how wonderful of you! And how very, very good! By what miracle did you manage to rescue it?"

"I took the bearings of the spot yesterday," he answered, "and I went out there in a boat before breakfast to combine a dip with a forlorn hope. It was a hundred to one chance; but, as you see, it came off. Luckily the water was much shallower than I had expected."

He accompanied the ladies to the railway station and was, of course, made the recipient of the grateful and flattering speeches to which he was entitled; but it was reserved for Miss Bligh to pronounce upon him, after the train had started, a eulogy which would certainly have amused him a good deal if he could have heard it.

"Now that," she cried, slapping her knee, "is what I call a hero!"

"Well," said Helen, laughing, "he is a very nice, kind old fellow, but——"

"He is *not* an old fellow!" interrupted Miss Bligh indignantly; "he is in the prime of life and strength. Mature, if you like; but maturity is just what you do like. You've always been rather mature yourself. From the first I have had a sort of intuition that he was the very man for you, Helen, and—mark my words!—he has discovered that you are the very woman for him."

"Who but you would jump to such wild conclusions, Susie? I'll allow that it was rather heroic of him to plunge into cold water like that at his age, and I do hope he won't have caught a chill; but don't you see that you rob his exploit of all its sublimity by your suggestion, for which I am sure the poor man wouldn't

thank you? Well, I have got my bangle back anyhow."

"You have got more than that," returned Miss Bligh, nodding oracularly. "I heard you giving him your address, and he'll turn up in St. James's Square within the next few weeks, or I'm much mistaken."

"I shall be much disappointed if he doesn't," said Helen.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIXED IDEA

It was not with Colonel Julyan and his more or less heroic dive into a Venetian lagoon that Helen's thoughts were busied on the journey back to England. She knew very well what she was returning to face, and although she could not persuade herself that she liked it, her mind was all but made up to go through with it. She had been virtually constituted her cousin's trustee: that was what the situation, when summed up, amounted to, and of course there was but one way of discharging a trust which she had neither the wish, nor, as she saw things, the right to repudiate. Her uncle, it was true, had had no right to impose this obligation upon her, no right to thrust her into the arms of a man whom she could not possibly respect, and for whom she had only a cousinly, or rather a quasi-maternal, love; yet she liked to think that the old man had died in peace, relying upon her to carry out his wishes. Moreover, there was something subtly flattering to her self-esteem in the fact that such implicit confidence had been felt in her. It was all very fine to laugh, as Susie Bligh affected to laugh, at young women who are eager to sacrifice themselves for ideas; but for what except ideas

are sacrifices ever made?—and how, for the matter of that, could this one be honourably evaded? Upon one condition alone could Lavernock accept the income which he must have been intended to enjoy; upon one condition alone could Helen grant him the use of it. She had contemplated the case at her leisure from every point of view, and was no longer open to dissuasion. So the mature Colonel would have been a negligible factor even if he had been as silly as Susie, in her impulsive way, imagined him.

The St. James's Square house was not yet ready to receive its new owner when she reached London. That spacious, solid mansion had so seldom been occupied of late years that it had gradually fallen into a state of dilapidation which necessitated painting, papering and ultimately something very like refurnishing. Orders, therefore, were awaited, and whilst these were being executed the two ladies found shelter at the Hôtel Ritz, where many visitors made haste to pay their respects to one of them.

"I suppose," said Lady Elizabeth Barton, with her glasses on her nose, her teacup in one hand and a bundle of cards in the other, "you know who all these good people are?"

"I suppose so," answered Helen. "I haven't seen any of them; I'm only at home to you and Lavernock; but they would hardly call if I didn't know them, would they?"

"Oh, they would," the elder lady declared, shaking her head. "You have no idea of the state of social chaos that London has got into or of the boundless impudence of the Jews and Americans and hybrids of

all sorts who have invaded us. Now that you are what you are, you will have to be very careful, I can tell you. I'm nobody in particular, beyond being the wife of a Cabinet Minister, which doesn't count for much in these times; but scarcely a week passes that I am not forced to be positively rude to some brazen woman or other who has elbowed her way into my house without the shadow of an excuse. Quite right of you to receive nobody here. You've seen Lavernock, then?"

"Not yet; he hasn't honoured me by asking for me."

"Oh!" said Lady Elizabeth, taking off her glasses and tapping her chin with them. "But perhaps he doesn't know that you have arrived."

"He does if he has read the letter I wrote him from Venice."

Lady Elizabeth said "Oh!" again, and looked as if she were about to add something, but refrained. The sagacious Lady Elizabeth often refrained from saying things to her niece, who, on this occasion, was pleased to reply to a question which had not been put.

"I don't correspond with him regularly; he so seldom answers letters. In fact, I have heard nothing from or of him since we left England."

"There hasn't been much good to hear," the old lady frankly avowed. "I'm afraid he is spending a great deal of money, and one knows he can't have any to spend. You will have to take him in hand, Helen. And the sooner the better."

A dissentient murmur from Miss Bligh, who had

taken no part in the conversation, caused Lady Elizabeth to stare at her in displeased surprise ; but Helen only said briefly, "I'll do what I can," and changed the subject.

After a few minutes, however, the subject was reopened in material fashion by the entrance of Lavernock himself, who marched in, frowning and smiling simultaneously, as was his not unfrequent custom when mentally perturbed. He was accompanied by a tall young man whom Helen did not recognise, but whom her aunt greeted with a friendly nod.

"Well, Helen," Lavernock began, holding out his hand to his cousin, "how are you? Hullo, Aunt Elizabeth! why aren't you in the House of Commons, listening to Uncle John's oration on Colonial preference? Helen, I don't think you know Forrester, do you? Let me introduce Captain Forrester, who has sometimes admired you respectfully from afar and is awfully anxious to be presented."

Helen had an indistinct recollection of this good-looking, well-groomed young brother officer of her cousin's, who stepped forward with a pleasant smile. Why he had been brought to call on her did not at first seem very apparent ; but after a minute or two she divined that Lavernock had had reasons for being disinclined to come alone. Lavernock was in a mess of some kind—that much might always be inferred when he fidgetted about the room and bit his nails, as he was doing now—and probably he did not wish to be questioned as to its nature. She promised herself that, whether he wished it or not, he should be questioned later, and she was rather amused by the futility of his

manœuvres for holding her at a distance. When had he ever been able to keep a secret from her?

He endeavoured to start a political discussion with his aunt; but Lady Elizabeth wanted to talk to Captain Forrester, whom she was eager to secure for a dance that she was giving; so she turned a deaf ear to Lavernock's provocative remarks, and it was evidently with the object of avoiding Helen that he gravitated towards Miss Bligh, who was seated on a sofa apart.

"Long time since we met," he began.

"Yes," agreed that uncompromisingly hostile lady; "and a pretty use you've made of it!"

"How do you know what use I've made of it?"

"I have ears. Eyes too; and, by the way, I'm sorry to see that yours are heavy and a bad colour. You'll never have young eyes again. Oh, one has only to look at you to perceive what you have been about all these years."

Lavernock seated himself astride on a chair, took out a cigarette and lighted it. He seldom hesitated to behave like that when he felt so disposed; but in truth he had become less and less a frequenter of ladies' drawingrooms.

"Oh, Helen doesn't mind," said he, in response to the protest of Miss Bligh's lifted eyebrows.

"And who told you that I didn't?"

"I beg your pardon; I hope you don't."

"It so happens that I don't; but you wouldn't stop smoking if I did, and that sort of thing is such shocking manners. You may remember that I always used to tell you you were the worst mannered boy I had ever met."

"I remember that you were fond of saying nasty things to me, and I never could understand why ; for I thought you were quite a good sort, and I daresay you are still. And what have *you* been about since you last snubbed me ?"

His cheeks were flushed, and there was a slight thick-ness in his utterance. Miss Bligh eyed him with increasing disfavour as she replied :

"Earning an honest livelihood, which is more than some people can boast of having done. I don't follow the racing intelligence very closely ; but——"

"I say," interrupted Lavernock, "are we going to fight or be friends ?"

"Neither, I hope ; but it must depend. I may as well tell you, once for all, that I am Helen's friend, and that if I ever have to fight for her—which doesn't seem impossible—I shall fight like a wild cat."

"And I may as well tell you, once for all," returned Lavernock, laughing, "that you won't have to use your teeth and claws on me. Of course I know well enough what you're driving at—and Aunt Elizabeth and all of them. Well, the thing isn't going to occur. I'm a non-starter. Do you see ?"

Miss Bligh saw ; but perhaps she did not quite believe. However, she was to some extent mollified, and, after saying that she was glad of that, she went the length of adding, "I won't deny that you have had rough treatment served out to you ; it's rather rough upon anybody to get his deserts. Still, if you're ready to grin and bear it, I'm willing to give you a pat on the back."

Lady Elizabeth, having suddenly remembered an

engagement, had already made a hurried exit, and Captain Forrester was getting on at a great pace with Helen, who found him rather more attractive than the average young man of his class. She knew, indeed, singularly little about young men of any class; generally speaking, they bored her, while she was apt to overawe them. But this one, with his bright blue eyes and his white teeth, was at all events agreeable to look at. She gathered also, from the smiling seriousness with which he discussed polo, cricket and rowing, that he had a mind as healthy as his complexion. The above topics formed the staple of his conversational resources, and athletic prowess served him, no doubt, as a standard of moral worth—which, to be sure, it roughly is. Something having been said about his late Colonel, he exclaimed:

“Oh, a splendid old chap! He could jump his own height ten years ago, they say.”

“He can still jump out of his own depth,” Helen remarked. “He dived to the bottom of the sea at Venice after a bracelet of mine which I had dropped into the water, and he actually retrieved it too.”

“Oh, he’d do that. There were precious few things that he couldn’t do in his young days, I believe. Pity he didn’t take a little more trouble to keep fit.”

“He has taken some trouble to make himself unfit for the sober enjoyments of middle age, hasn’t he?”

That was a question which no loyal officer of the Fusilier Guards could be expected to answer. Forrester, cheerfully ignoring it, proceeded to expatiate upon the affection with which Colonel Julyan was remembered in

the battalion both by officers and men ; but his hearer was becoming inattentive. Her eyes had strayed to her cousin, who presently got up, tossed the end of his cigarette into the empty grate and said :

"Well, I must be off. Come on, Forrester. Good-bye, Helen. See you again some day."

"You haven't seen me today yet," Helen returned ; "at any rate, you haven't spoken to me. I want you to give me a few minutes more, please, now that you are here."

Helen had an extremely enviable faculty for imposing her will upon those about her without apparent effort. Lavernock was evidently reluctant to obey orders, Captain Forrester probably did not wish to be dismissed and Miss Bligh was quite determined not to be. Yet in a very brief space of time Helen and her cousin had the room to themselves.

"Now," she began, "tell me what is the matter."

"I never said anything was the matter, did I?" he answered rather sullenly.

"There was no need. Is it money?"

Lavernock sighed impatiently. "Oh, money, yes—and other things. I don't believe any fellow ever had such infernal luck as I get all round! Yes, as a matter of fact, I do want money—want it pretty badly, and don't at this moment see where to lay my hand upon it. Another thing, Helen; I'm not going to take money from you. I tell you that to save time."

He did not save much time by protesting for five minutes that nothing would induce him to accept an offer which he ended by accepting. Very likely he had

intended to refuse it; the reasons that he gave for doing so were unanswerable, though Helen had answers ready to meet them. But he was, for the moment, very hard up, and he had never in his life been able to hold out long against temptation. As he pocketed the cheque which was promptly written out for him, he said it must be clearly understood that this was a loan.

"Even so, I've no business to borrow from you, and I'm sure you despise me in your heart."

"Indeed I don't!" Helen declared, with truth. "What I do feel very strongly in my heart is that the money ought to be yours, not mine, and with all my heart I wish you would let me make you a free gift of it."

"You know perfectly well that I can't do that," he retorted, not over graciously. "You know as well as I do that when a man wants an unmarried woman's money, there's only one permissible way for him to get hold of it."

"Yes," she assented, and her eyelids dropped.

But Lavernock did not say what for one sick minute of sudden and cold terror she felt sure that he must be going to say. Was there, after all, a touch of nobility in the man's nature? Did he realise that, although she could never love him, she would marry him if he asked her? And was he, for all his manifold shortcomings, generous enough to reject so humiliating a solution? He only laughed and remarked that there remained some legitimate methods of helping the destitute. She might, for instance, take that prodigious white elephant Lavernock House off his hands. Blandford said she

could well afford to do so. Had she seen Blandford yet?

She had not; but she had corresponded with the lawyer and was beginning to have some idea of what her very large income could accomplish. Of course she would gladly become her cousin's tenant, if he wished it, and would more than gladly do anything else for him that he would allow her to do.

"There's nothing else, thanks," said Lavernock, getting up. "Don't worry yourself about me, Helen; I shall be all right—or all wrong; it doesn't much matter which. I don't mind telling you that you've got me out of a deuce of a hole by letting me have this loan, and that's enough for one day."

He evidently was not in the mood to give her further information, nor could she resist a sensation of profound relief when the door closed behind him. No doubt he had some pressing gambling debt to pay; there might be other and more serious liabilities in the background, of which she was sure to hear later. She was sure to hear of them; he was sure to take money from her again, sure eventually—alas! she knew him too well to rely upon his struggles after magnanimity—to urge a claim which she had resolved to concede. And never before had the impossibility of loving him as a wife ought to love her husband been more glaringly apparent to her; never before had Lavernock struck her as physically repellent. He had deteriorated during her absence; the signs that he had been drinking that afternoon had been unmistakable; his voice and manner had acquired a coarseness which had seemed to her new.

"I don't know that I can!" Helen exclaimed aloud.

She stood for a moment by the window, staring out vacantly at the Green Park and the strolling pedestrians and the hazy sky. Then, "But I must," she said decisively.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE OATH

"SURELY," said Lady Elizabeth, "if it is the right thing for me to give a dance within six months of my poor brother's death, it can't be the wrong thing for you to appear at it. People don't shut themselves up for a year nowadays even when they lose their husbands or their wives. Once upon a time one was expected to hold one's handkerchief to one's nose at a funeral; today it isn't considered decent to howl in public. These things are mere matters of convention and have nothing at all to say to one's private feelings."

So Helen was persuaded to attend her aunt's entertainment, although she had not come to London with any idea of participating in the gaieties of the season. She was in London partly because she had no other home, partly because duty and destiny had seemed to beckon her thither. It is impossible to escape destiny, and since she was bent upon doing her duty, she might as well begin by accepting the hospitality of the Bartons, who had already given her to understand that they shared her conception of what that duty was. Lady Elizabeth, however, was less successful with her

nephew than with her niece. Lavernock flatly refused to show himself at a dance, alleging by way of excuse that he had had to pawn his only evening suit; which, as his aunt observed, really could not be true. In any case, he was an absentee, and if he was missed, it was not by Helen.

Very little time, indeed, was given her for speculating upon the causes of what she could not but inwardly welcome as a respite. She had not intended to dance; but she speedily found herself dancing, speedily found herself booked for the entire programme. The majority of her aunt's guests were already known to her, and even if they had not been, it is unlikely that a young lady of her wealth and beauty would have been left long without partners. Perhaps these were a shade more eager, more forthcoming, more desirous to please than they had been in days gone by; but Helen took little note of their changed demeanour. The gilded youths of London had at no time interested her, nor she them until her own recently acquired gilding had made them feel that they owed it to themselves to break down her rather disconcerting aloofness. As an exception, she was conscious of distinct interest in and liking for young Forrester, who was at once boyish and manly—always an attractive combination—and who made small secret of the fact that he was deeply smitten with her. Afterwards, when she came to know him better, she discovered that he never had secrets, being constitutionally incapable of keeping any. Doubtless that was why he was almost pathetically reticent, when Helen made some attempts to draw him upon the subject of her cousin. "I shall be telling you all I know if you go on like

this," he seemed to say, "and it isn't cricket to give away a pal." She could hear the very words of the artless, unspoken appeal, and, recognising that it would not be "cricket" on her part to take further advantage of an unwilling witness, she desisted. She gathered, nevertheless, that Lavernock did not enjoy his friend's complete esteem, and she began to fear that she had not heard the worst of the man whose name she expected to bear.

Perhaps the worst that Captain Forrester could have said of his brother officer (but he never would have said it), was that Lavernock was "not straight." This, unhappily, had been proved more than once, and it accounted for the fact that many people now fought shy of one who had in his earlier days been universally liked. For the rest, without having been guilty of any actual offence heinous enough to merit ostracism, Lavernock had of late exhibited a taste for shady company which had caused him to lose caste. It may also be that his comparative poverty had been injurious to him; for we live in times when rank without wealth is almost as sure of being regarded with impatient disdain as wealth without rank is of commanding general respect.

At a later hour Helen was accosted by another friend of her cousin's who could have given her all the particulars that she desired, as well as some that she did not, but who was little more disposed than Captain Forrester to render her that dubious service.

"I came here with some hope of meeting you," Colonel Julyan avowed. "Not that I expect you to waste time in talking to me now that we have met, though."

"Oh, but I want to talk to you," Helen said. "Let us go and sit out this dance somewhere. I am sure my partner will let me off."

Her partner, with a rather bad grace, had to do so. Helen's habit of quietly taking it for granted that any request of hers would be complied with, reinforced by a sincerely modest conviction that she was as unimportant to her partners as they were to her, sufficed for the attainment of her purpose, and, being acquainted with the topography of the house, she was able to conduct the companion whom she had chosen straight to a secluded corner.

"I am much honoured," he remarked, as he seated himself beside her. "I can only suppose that I have my grey hairs to thank for this distinction."

She did not contradict him. "Old and middle-aged men are nicer than young ones, I always think," said she. "One is more at one's ease with them, and personally I am more accustomed to them. The only young man with whom I have ever been anything like intimate in my life is my cousin Lavernock—and I am sorry to say that he isn't always at his ease with me now."

"I am not," observed Colonel Julyan.

"Not what?"

"Not sorry if he has a wholesome awe of you. It's what he was meant to have, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," she answered; "but I think it is more probable that he was meant to trust me."

"And doesn't he?"

"After a fashion he does. Until lately I believe he did, and he always came to me when he was in any.

trouble ; but now, as of course you know, things have been made awkward and difficult for us both."

Colonel Julyan nodded. "Awkward and difficult," he assented. Then, after a pause, "Still you don't give me the impression of being a person who would consent to be ruled by circumstances. - Circumstances, when all's said, are what we choose to make them."

"Not always: one must consent to be ruled by the wishes of the dead."

"Do you really think so? It seems to me that when one dies, one definitely retires from the game. People who are dead may have wished for this or that during their lifetime, but who knows whether they wouldn't wish for something quite different if they could return to the world? This world, such as it is—and it isn't much of a world at best—belongs to the living."

"Well, but the law allows us to make wills and sees that they are carried out."

"Just so; and the fulfilment of legal obligations is all that any reasonable man asks of his successors."

"Yet you said something just now about the feeling that Lavernock was meant to have for me."

"Oh, conjectures are unavoidable."

"I think they are, and I think it is a very safe conjecture that he was not meant to be deprived for ever of what ought in common right and justice to be his."

This was putting the dots on the i's after a fashion scarcely usual between mere acquaintances; but Colonel Julyan, who quite understood Helen's superb disdain of punctilio, was more amused than surprised, more gratified than amused.

"The testator," he observed, "doesn't seem to have thought that it would be very safe to let him have it."

"Not unconditionally," Helen agreed. "I do wish," she added, after a moment, "that it weren't impossible for him to accept an annual allowance from me!"

Colonel Julyan's only rejoinder was a barely perceptible shrug of the shoulders.

"You think he wouldn't be too proud to accept it?" asked Helen, with a quick frown. "But then you evidently dislike Lavernock."

"No; only perhaps I am old enough to be allowed to say that I like you. And, naturally, I see your difficulty."

"You do dislike him," Helen persisted, "and I wonder why! Is he, after all, so very different from other young men? Is there really anything against him, except that he has been wild and extravagant?"

She obtained only an evasive reply. A tendency towards wildness and extravagance, Colonel Julyan remarked, is a pretty good argument against giving a man control over capital. Speaking for himself, if he were so unfortunate as to have a wild and extravagant son, he would certainly, in making his will, take care to appoint trustees. It was a pity, no doubt, that this had not been done in Lavernock's case: still there are more ways than one of dealing with an awkward situation. As for refusing money, he was inclined to think that when Miss Monk had lived as long as he had done, she would agree with him that practically nobody ever does that.

"Short as my life has been," Helen retorted, "I have had offers of money refused again and again."

All the same, she had never known her cousin refuse pecuniary aid, save as a matter of form, and she rather suddenly decided that she did not want to talk about her cousin any more.

Nor did Colonel Julyan, who much preferred to talk about Venice, and St. James's Square, and the garden appertaining to a Maidenhead cottage which Miss Monk might perhaps be induced to honour with a visit some day. Upon the above themes he discoursed so agreeably that Miss Monk's name was inscribed in the black books of two more forgotten and justifiably wrathful partners.

Towards the end of the evening Lady Elizabeth, who had noticed disapprovingly her niece's prolonged colloquy with Colonel Julyan, took occasion to say :

"I wouldn't see too much of that man if I were you, Helen. He doesn't bear the best of reputations, and I am sure poor Lavernock has got no good from him. He is one of that lot who go in for high play and who are not out of pocket at the end of the year, though the young fellows whom they encourage to play with them always are."

This happened to be unjust, for if Julyan was a gamester, he had never been anything but a scrupulously honourable one, nor was he fond of sitting down to a card-table with his juniors. But detraction had little effect upon Helen, who liked to form her own judgments from the result of her own observation. Giving an account of the dance to Miss Bligh the next morning, she said :

"Colonel Julyan was there. He asked if he might call, and I told him we should be very glad to see him. Somehow, I fancy that he isn't quite as black as he is painted."

"Who has been trying to paint him black?" asked Miss Bligh, bristling up. "I should like to make that calumniator swallow his paint-pot, brush and all! I know a white man when I see one, and I'll answer for it that there isn't much amiss with Colonel Julyan."

Colonel Julyan would have told her that there was a good deal amiss with him. Upwards of two score well rung and mostly ill-spent years, amongst other things. His past had been of a nature which he would have been very sorry to disclose to Miss Bligh or Miss Monk in detail, though they were welcome enough to know what they probably did know about it in general terms. Of course he was not, and never could be, a candidate for Helen Monk's hand. He might perhaps, without undue presumption, be a candidate for her friendship. A middle-aged man who aspires to be the friend of a girl does not necessarily make a fool of himself thereby; although he is, to be sure, in some danger of doing so if he refuses to look things in the face. Colonel Julyan resolutely looked himself in the face, while shaving, on the morning after Lady Elizabeth's dance, and saw the reflection of a comely, refined countenance, with rather deep lines running from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth, faint crows'-feet about the eyes and crisp, curly hair, flecked with silver. It was a countenance which had worked havoc with many hearts in days gone by, and it might be said, upon the whole, to have worn

wonderfully well ; but the point which demanded ruthless emphasis in connection with it was that its day had gone by. Why should such a point be in any way relevant to a mere question of friendship ? Well, only because Helen Monk happened to affect Julyan as no woman had ever done before, and because of that off-chance of making a fool of oneself which had to be reckoned with. He had met innumerable women, and had, perhaps, been a little unfortunate in his encounters ; he had lived in social circles which, with some outward show of being wide, are in reality narrow ; his opinion of women in the abstract was not a respectful one. Yet, like the rest of us, young and old, he had in the recesses of his heart a feminine ideal, and if, at this late stage, his ideal had found materialisation, was he any the worse off ? He really could not see why he should be ; still less could he see the smallest reason for denying himself the pleasure of Miss Monk's society. As we get on in life we grow perforce unselfish. For ourselves we ask little, expect little, are satisfied with little. The service of those whom we love becomes its own reward. That, rightly understood, is the real and by no means inadequate compensation for being out of the running.

Colonel Julyan, therefore, not only paid the permitted visit but followed it up with frequent others, in which he was accompanied by Forrester or Lavernock or both of them. Between the three men and the two ladies there ensued a rapid intimacy ; Hurlingham, Ranelagh and Lord's affording scenes and occasions which were usually suggested by Forrester and willingly assented to by Helen, who knew so little about that world of which the source and end is amusement. Never before in her life

had she been to Hurlingham or Ranelagh, and only once or twice, during Lavernock's Eton days, to Lord's. Gaily attired crowds ; the babble of her contemporaries, male and female ; the consciousness, at first annoying, of being a notable figure, stared at, admired, undisguisedly envied—all these were novelties to her, and all ended, if all did not begin, by being pleasant. There were days when Lavernock was not in a bad temper ; Forrester was always in a good one ; while Colonel Julian was courteous, kindly, anxious to be useful and, in certain directions, eminently capable of being so. In the matter of house decoration, for instance, his taste might be relied upon, and, as Helen had no great confidence in her own, she often consulted him with regard to the work then in progress at the family mansion.

"I am sorry to tell you," she said, one day, "that although we have meekly endeavoured to follow your directions, the dining-room is going to be a flat failure. Exactly what is wrong with it I can't say ; but no doubt you would see at a glance. Would you mind meeting me in St. James's Square some afternoon and pointing out the mistake, whatever it is ?"

His answer was that he would be only too delighted to meet her anywhere for any purpose. Might he call for her and Miss Bligh in his motor ?

"No ; I think we'll meet at the house, please," she said, "just you and I, without any disturbing third person. I don't want Susie to put in her word ; she's too obstinately flamboyant."

Thus would Colonel Julian have been made aware, if he had not known it already, that in Miss Monk's eyes he was entitled to the prerogatives of middle

age. Well, that was exactly what he wished for. So, at least, he assured himself more than once when he recalled her matter-of-course assumption that a tryst between him and her stood in no need of conventional safeguards. Had he not made up his mind that permission to serve her was all he cared to ask?

Consequently, on receipt of a summons for which he had to wait rather longer than he had anticipated, he hastened to do Miss Monk the service of indicating what was the matter with a very long, narrow dining-room which no scheme of colour could render other than sombre. It might, he explained, easily be made to look severe and imposing, and when you had done that, you would have done all that it would ever allow you to do without mute protest.

Helen's acquiescence was ready, but not enthusiastic. It was plain that she had either lost interest in domestic embellishment or that her thoughts were otherwise engaged. After a minute or two, she said rather abruptly :

"I have been hearing more about my cousin these last few days. Is it true that he is ruining himself by playing cards for enormous stakes?"

Julyan did not reply at once. He thought he knew what Miss Monk, consciously or unconsciously (probably the latter), wanted; he had thought he knew what she was virtually asking for on the evening of the Bartons' dance. Well, it was not out of his power to oblige her. There were reasons—plenty of them—for which she would be amply justified in disregarding the supposed wishes of her late uncle, and these might at least be hinted at by a friend in the event of absolute

danger. But the danger was not imminent; he had never believed that Helen would marry Lavernock; he felt sure that she would soon find out for herself as much as there was any need for her to discover, and of all parts that he could be called upon to play, that of a tale-bearer was the most repugnant to him. So he only said:

"Ruin is a big word. Lavernock certainly does play for high stakes; but whether he loses more than he wins I can't tell you."

"Yet you are one of those who play with him, are you not?"

"I do play with him sometimes."

"And you have more control over him than most people, they say."

"I am afraid whoever says so pays me too high a compliment. I am only a retired colonel, remember. When I was on the active list I had, of course, a certain control over the conduct of my young officers; but I was always chary of exercising it. One can hardly rebuke other people for doing what one does oneself."

"Isn't that rather a humiliating admission to make, Colonel Julyan?"

"I make it with all due humility and humiliation."

"Well," said Helen, turning a displeased face towards the speaker, "I am disappointed. I thought perhaps you would help me; but evidently you won't."

"My dear Miss Monk, if there were any way in which I could possibly be of assistance to you, you should not have to ask twice."

"That is a manner of talking; it doesn't seem to mean much. I have never, that I can remember, asked

anybody to help me before ; I have always depended upon myself, and always, to tell the truth, thought that I had a stronger will than Lavernock's. But now he has got out of my hand, and—and the whole situation is intolerable ! I can't stand looking on while he drowns ! What am I to do ? ”

She spoke with unwonted vehemence, and both her voice and her eyes gave evidence of a distress which would have appealed to Julyan's heart, had any appeal been required by that vanquished organ.

“ What am *I* to do ? ” he asked, smiling. “ Shall I swear never to play cards with your cousin again ? ”

“ Well, if you would do that, it would be something. ”

“ It is done. I swear. Anything more ? ”

She hesitated for a moment, then resumed : “ In spite of what you say, I suspect that he must be more or less guided by your example. Could you not give him a lead by staking smaller sums yourself ? ”

“ I could ; but it would be a little difficult. As a matter of fact, he and I belong to a club at which the stakes are always what is called high. In my case it doesn't signify whether they are high or low, as my winnings and losses just about balance, ordinarily speaking ; but I am afraid the same can't be said of his. A better plan would be for me to give up play altogether. From today, then, Miss Monk, I solemnly swear that I will play cards for money no more. ”

“ Oh, but, ” gasped Helen, taken aback by so sudden and complete a surrender, “ I didn't intend to ask for anything like that ! Aren't you—everybody says you are—simply devoted to gambling ? ”

“ It is my most cherished vice, ” he answered, with a

smile. "That is why I feel a peculiar satisfaction in casting it away from me to please you. I cast it as a sort of straw to the drowning Lavernock; though I don't promise that he will clutch at it. And now that that little matter is disposed of, let us get back to our wall-papers; for I don't think you quite took in what I was saying just now about the value of a dim, subdued background."

CHAPTER VIII

MARGERY VERNON

WHEN you ask a man for the loan of an overcoat, you do not expect him to respond by forthwith divesting himself of his coat also. That literal method of interpreting a fine precept is exaggerated, embarrassing and even, in some cases, borders upon impertinence. So Helen could not feel quite as much obliged by Colonel Julyan's startling act of renunciation as she was aware that she ought to be. She would have been a good deal better pleased if he had contented himself with promising that he would bring the weight of his age and authority to bear upon her cousin. As it was, he had the air of making a tremendous sacrifice for her sake, although there did not seem to be any certainty of its proving a fruitful one. The truth, she thought, was that Colonel Julyan did not like Lavernock, did not greatly care whether he sank or swam, but expected, and upon the whole rather hoped, that he would sink. Surely he might have understood that that was not a very friendly attitude to assume towards her! But indeed it was evident that he did not understand her at all.

He understood her well enough. He had, in these

days, occasional conversations with his staunch adherent Miss Bligh, to whom he spoke of Helen in terms which showed that he had at least taken some pains to study his subject.

"Miss Monk," said he, "belongs to her epoch. She doesn't think she does, and it seems a little odd that she should, considering the way in which she has been brought up; but I suppose these things are in the air. The women of today are beginning, for the first time in the history of the human race, to look at marriage from a masculine standpoint. Somehow or other, it has dawned upon them that they don't exist for the sole purpose of becoming wives and mothers, and that there is a great deal to be said in favour of celibacy. And Miss Monk has far better reasons than most of them for preferring to remain as she is. Wealth, independence, a strong liking for being, as she always has been, her own mistress——"

"Ah, but," interrupted Miss Bligh, "you forget a woman's equally strong feeling that it's wrong to insist upon having what she likes."

"Is that feeling characteristic of the modern woman? Well, I daresay it is characteristic of Miss Monk, who is only modern because she happened to be born in modern times. What I mean about her is that she is not a marrying woman. You can see that by her manner with men. She knows a great many and meets fresh ones every day. Some she likes, and some she doesn't; but never a one of them does she regard as an even remotely possible husband. There have always been bachelors who have viewed women at large in that style, but it hasn't until within the last few years been

in the power of any single woman that I ever met to reciprocate."

"I suspect," answered Miss Bligh, "that human nature is much what it used to be. Some of us have got to be old maids, because there aren't enough husbands to go round. I'm an old maid myself, and pretty well satisfied, thank you. But you may depend upon it that we shan't get rid of our instincts or our natural mission, whatever airs it may suit us to put on. As for poor dear Helen, you know what she has taken it into her head that *her* mission is."

"I believe I know that she might be prevailed upon to modify her idea of it."

"Do you?" asked Miss Bligh eagerly. "Did she tell you that?"

"No, she doesn't tell me anything; she doesn't even hint at much. But I see, as I should think you must also, that she would give all she possesses to be free."

"Oh, all she possesses!—that's rather too large an order. Besides, I don't know how Lavernock could consent to be bought off. Everything depends upon him. If he pushes his claim, all's lost!"

"He isn't much inclined to push it, is he?"

"For the moment he isn't; he professes to have no claim. But he may begin to see things in a different light any day. In other words, as soon as he tires of Miss Margery Vernon."

"Oh, you've heard of that affair?" asked Julyan, with lifted eyebrows.

"You talk about modern women, and you don't know that they always hear of all such affairs! So I daresay, did the ancient ones; only they didn't discuss them."

"Does Miss Monk discuss this one?"

"Helen never discusses matters of that kind; I don't think they interest her. But she is no more astonished or shocked than I am. In fact, we're so little shocked that we're going to see the woman dance or sing, or whatever it is that she does, and Lavernock is to be of the party. I offer you that for modern!"

In justice to Helen it must be said that her wish to see a piece which was drawing large audiences just then had been prompted by no curiosity respecting the actress with whose name gossip loudly coupled her cousin's, and it is only fair to Lavernock to add that he had done his best to dissuade her from a project which was not to his liking. But Helen had not been deterred by being told that "the rottenest show out" would bore her to death, nor had she accepted sundry pleas on which her cousin had sought to excuse himself from accompanying her. She said she was sorry he didn't like the play, but she had already engaged a box for it, and had already ordered the subsequent supper at which he and Colonel Julyan and Captain Forrester were to favour her by being her guests. So she hoped he would try not to mind. It may be that she really did not see why he should. Her long-standing toleration of Lavernock's peccadilloes, her general acquiescence in his mode of life, as being what the conditions inevitably made it, a certain high disdain of items on her part probably caused her to regard Miss Margery Vernon as casual and negligible. Moreover, there had been several previous theatre parties, followed or preceded by entertainments for which one or other of the men had paid the bill, and now it was her turn.

"You are coming with us to see *The Giggling Girl*, aren't you?" she asked Colonel Julian, whom she met in the Park one morning.

"If I am invited," he answered.

"Of course you are. I told Susie to invite you. Didn't she?"

"Perhaps she did. Anyhow, I shall be charmed; though I'm afraid you won't be amused."

"Why not? Captain Forrester has seen it twice, and he says he laughed till he cried."

"Happy Forrester! Let us hope that you may find him contagious as well as contiguous. I'll take the back seat to which my years and my dulness entitle me; so if I fall asleep, the spirits of the party won't be damped."

When the time came, he found that he was not to obtain without a struggle a privilege for which competition is seldom keen. Lavernock was very anxious—quite pertinaciously and irritably anxious—to appropriate that back seat in the recesses of the box which commanded but a bare glimpse of the stage. He said he didn't want to see the infernal piece; he had seen it ever so many times and was more than sick of it.

"I don't want to talk to old Bligh either, and I'm sure she doesn't want to talk to me. You might be good-natured, Colonel, and take her off my hands."

But Julian, declining on this occasion to exhibit good nature, possessed himself resolutely of a chair which he did not propose to utilise for purposes of slumber. If from it he could see little or nothing of the play, it was very well situated for enabling him to study the progress

of another little drama which interested him considerably more. He was somewhat mystified as to Helen's motive for being where she was. A silly, vulgar musical comedy could not attract her; neither could she wish to gaze at the features of her equally vulgar rival. She would not care how many rivals she had nor how glaring might be their vulgarity. Possibly she had no conscious motive, but it was not impossible that she had an unconscious one. Unconsciously, no doubt, yet perceptibly to Julyan's close scrutiny, she was casting about her almost in desperation for a loophole. Notwithstanding her habitual serene self-possession, there was at moments a scared, hunted look in her eyes. Bound in honour though she held herself to be by her uncle's supposed behest, she longed—whether she knew it or not—to be furnished with some reason which everybody must acknowledge as valid for setting it aside. She longed to be in a position to say to Lavernock with a clear conscience, "This is final; this puts our marriage out of the question. I will do anything I can for you; you shall have half my fortune, or the whole of it; but I can never be your wife."

The actual situation offered possibilities. Lavernock was in an extremely bad temper; he had evidently been dining too well; it was likewise evident that he was nervous about being seen in his cousin's company by the notoriously jealous Margery Vernon. A very little provocation might suffice to make him say unpardonable things.

During the first act, however, he said nothing at all. Bending forward, with his elbows on his knees and a frown on his brow, he took cover behind Miss Bligh's

broad back and doubtless hoped to escape observation from the stage. Rather foolish of him, Julyan thought; for, as Miss Margery Vernon's sharp eyes were pretty sure to detect him sooner or later, he would have done better to reveal boldly his presence where he was perfectly entitled to be than to put himself in the wrong by trying to hide. But, as has been mentioned, he was not quite sober, and Margery in her tantrums was about as pleasant to face as an angry tigress.

This favourite of the music-halls who occasionally, as now, took a part in one of those strange representations which dispense with plot, demand no sort of histrionic ability and consist of a series of glittering, disconnected tableaux, interspersed with topical songs and dances, was not without talent of the kind relished by her audiences. She danced neatly, sang as well as a queer, cracky voice would let her and, although she was no longer in her first youth, could still contrive to look charmingly pretty at a distance. Her great, dark eyes said all manner of things (most of them things which should not have been said) to the appreciative; her gay smile shone upon the just and upon the unjust; she had, or appeared to have, an inexhaustible flow of animal spirits against which it was hard for the most morose spectator to hold out. Her special public spoke of her affectionately as "a real good sort" or "an awfully jolly little woman."

Such was Margery Vernon on the stage. Off it she was a very different person, as Lavernock knew to his cost. In this frankly idiotic piece she had two rather catching songs and a dance. The rest of her part was insignificant, or, to speak more accurately, she had

none. What happened was that from time to time somebody tickled her or gave her a sly dig in the ribs. She then doubled up and became convulsed with laughter, which communicated itself to her fellow performers, spread in ripples across the footlights, gained stalls, boxes, pit and gallery, and culminated in a universal roar of hilarity. Apparently this was one of those subtle strokes of humour so dear to the British heart. Age cannot stale nor custom wither their exquisite monotony.

Forrester went on sniggering delightedly after the curtain had fallen upon the first act. "Isn't she ripping!" he exclaimed. "And she's always the same, you know—always throws herself into the spirit of the thing like that, just as if this wasn't something near the seventieth night. How she does it I can't think!"

Miss Bligh, though less enthusiastic, had to own that she had been amused. "Infantine drivel, of course; but perhaps that's just where the joke comes in. And I will say for the woman that she's somehow comic."

Lavernock had slipped out of the box. Helen, looking rather grave and annoyed, stared straight before her and made no remark until Julyan inquired how the performance, so far as it had gone, struck her.

"I don't think Miss Vernon funny," she confessed, without looking round; "that laugh of hers, which everybody seems to find so infectious, makes me want to stop my ears." Then, suddenly turning her head towards her interrogator, "Didn't you tell me that you knew her?" she asked. "What sort of a person is she?"

The entrance of a couple of youths who had come

to pay their respects to Miss Monk exempted Julyan from answering a question to which no honest reply could have been given, and he was left to wonder what had set Helen's teeth on edge.

He did not have to wait very long for enlightenment. As the second act began, Lavernock returned, having evidently employed the interval in refreshing himself and being, from that or some other cause, in a totally changed mood.

"Now then, Forrester," said he jocularly, "do you mean to monopolise Helen for the whole evening, or is a poor relation to be allowed a look in?"

Forrester gave up his seat good-humouredly enough, and as, at the same moment, Miss Bligh looked over her shoulder to say something to Colonel Julyan, the latter dropped into the chair which had hitherto been occupied by Lavernock. Thus he obtained a clearer view of what was taking place on the stage, and thus he speedily became aware that Margery Vernon was furious. Perhaps there were only two other persons in the house who guessed that she was, and of those two one was at some pains to intimate that it was a matter of indifference to him whether she was or not. Lavernock must either have recognised the futility of attempting further concealment or taken courage to assert his independence; for there was something distinctly aggressive in his demeanour as he sat, with his sleek, handsome head close to his cousin's, chatting in an undertone and only from time to time throwing a scornful glance at the really clever pantomime which was being enacted for his and her benefit. Margery Vernon could on occasion be very clever indeed. Anybody can be impudent; but

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it is not every actress who could have managed to convey, as she was doing, a suggestion of peculiar insolence towards one small part of the semicircle of humanity by which she was faced whilst exhilarating the remainder with what appeared to be no more than a somewhat audacious exaggeration of her part. She never ceased laughing ; she skipped about the stage as nimbly and light-heartedly as was her wont ; only there was a malignant fire in her eyes which Julyan would have known how to interpret even if she had not permitted herself gestures and grimaces which were not open to misinterpretation. She did not raise her thumb to her nose and spread out her fingers ; but she might almost as well have done so, and she would not have been half as indescribably offensive if she had.

“ Don’t you wish you may get him ! ” she seemed to be saying to Helen. “ He’s mine for as long as I choose, and so you shall find ! ”

Helen took this unequivocal challenge as a woman of her nerve and breeding was sure to take it. She appeared to notice nothing ; her face did not change nor did her colour fade ; yet Julyan, watching her, could not doubt that she was passing through a painful ordeal, and he felt angrily that it was one to which she ought not to have been subjected. He might have remembered, but did not, that it was she herself who had insisted upon coming to the theatre, and that Lavernock had tried to prevent her from doing so. He forgot, too, that at an earlier hour he had half suspected her of seeking some such pretext as this for a rupture. He was provoked with Lavernock and felt less philosophic than usual

when, on the termination of the act, the latter took him by the arm and led him out to smoke a cigarette.

"I wish," he could not help saying, "you would give your friend Miss Margery a hint to behave herself with common decency."

"Oh, you saw, did you? Sickening little wretch! And all because I sometimes venture to talk to my own first cousin! Who but a woman would be such an idiot!"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Julyan, "but, if you'll excuse my saying so, I don't think many men, situated as you are, would allow that kind of thing to happen."

"Perhaps you'll tell me how the devil I was to prevent it. And, if it comes to that, perhaps you don't so very well know how I *am* situated."

"I know what is everybody's secret," Julyan answered. "What puzzles me is that you should take so much trouble to cut your own throat. Not that I object. I shall be only too glad if, after this, Miss Monk tells you that you and she must be cousins for the future and nothing more."

"Thanks awfully. It isn't quite a thousand to one that I shall give her the chance of telling me that, though."

"I most sincerely hope you never will."

"You take a deep interest in Helen," remarked Lavernock sneeringly.

Julyan kept his temper. "One may be allowed at my age," he returned, "to take an interest in ladies of hers. You don't do me the honour to be jealous of me on that account, I presume."

Lavernock laughed. "Well, hardly!" he replied,

with perhaps unintentional cruelty. "If I were jealous of anybody, it would be much more likely to be Forrester, who seems to me—but I'm not jealous, as it happens. Now I must go and get a drink. I don't think I can stick another act of this stuff. Tell Helen I'll join you at Ritz's afterwards."

CHAPTER IX

HYSTERICIS

DURING the last act of the piece Miss Margery Vernon was pleased to desist entirely from her aggressive tactics. She no longer looked at the box in which our friends were seated, and this, coupled with Lavernock's absence, enabled both Helen and Julyan to form a pretty accurate surmise as to the cause of her changed demeanour. Helen went a little further and guessed that Colonel Julyan had taken her cousin out in order to give him instructions; whereat she was rather unreasonably irritated. It was true that she had asked him to help her; but she had not meant to ask for his protection, which she did not need, nor did she like his quiet smile, when their eyes met, which had too much the appearance of saying, "Didn't I tell you so?"

Well, of course she had made a mistake in going to that theatre; but she made another, and less excusable one, when she imagined that a very good friend of hers was so ungenerous as to be diverted by her discomfiture. The discomfited are themselves apt to be wanting in generosity, and Helen, for all her impassive bearing, had been a good deal more upset by what had taken place than she cared to avow. However, she did end

by making an avowal to Miss Bligh, who, for her part, had noticed nothing. It was not until the two ladies had reached their hotel, whither their guests were to follow them, that Helen broke in upon the monologue with which her companion had contentedly beguiled the way by exclaiming :

"I don't think it was Lavernock's fault ; I don't suppose he could have expected that odious woman to insult me as she did ! But I have never had such an experience before in my life, and I wouldn't go through it again for anything !"

Miss Bligh stared, round-eyed. "Who insulted you ?" she asked. "Margery Vernon ? You must have been letting your imagination run away with you, Helen. I can't think what you mean."

Even when full explanations had been given, she remained incredulous and was disposed to make light of the incident. A woman of that class !—and under all the circumstances ! Did it really matter if she had thought she saw her way to be impertinent ?

"It wasn't that," answered Helen ; "of course impertinence wouldn't have mattered. It was her horrible, wicked, grinning face. Once or twice she looked absolutely devilish ! She—she frightened me."

"*Sal volatile*," said the practical Miss Bligh, and went off at once to get it.

No doubt she was quite right. That Helen, of all people, should own to having been frightened, that she should be pale, shaken and within sight of tears, was as clear evidence as could be of unstrung nerves. The remedy having produced the anticipated effect, Miss Bligh said briskly :

"The fact of the matter is, my dear, that you have been doing too much and overtiring yourself. Then you take it into your head that it is a good thing to dispense with dinner before going to the theatre, and what's the consequence? Why, that, instead of having indigestion, you get a waking nightmare and mistake a common little music-hall singer for a tragedy queen. You'll be all right as soon as you've had your supper. I want mine very badly I know, and I wish those men would look sharp!"

They were apparently in no hurry, and when at length two of them arrived, they had to confess that they did not know what had become of the third.

"I'm afraid we've kept you waiting an unconscionable time, Miss Monk," Forrester began.

"You have," said Miss Bligh.

"We're most awfully sorry, but we waited ever so long ourselves for Lavernock, who went off to look for his brougham and never came back."

"Are you sure," asked Miss Bligh, who, being hungry and rather cross, was even less discreet than usual, "that he didn't go off in search of Margery Vernon's brougham? It's true that that may be only another way of saying the same thing. Anyhow, I hope we are not going to be made to suffer any longer for his bad manners. I forget whether I mentioned it before, but if I did, I don't apologise for telling you again, that neither Helen nor I had any dinner this evening, and we're simply starving!"

"I suppose he isn't coming," Helen said; "but whether he is or not, I think he has been allowed time

enough. Susie, will you show Captain Forrester the way to the supper room?"

"Never was more anxious to show anything to anybody in my life!" Miss Bligh declared. "Come along, Captain Forrester."

A moment later the door was thrown open and the defaulter was announced.

"Sorry to be so late, Helen," said he, not over graciously, "but I couldn't help it. I thought, of course, you would have sat down without me."

Miss Bligh and Forrester had already left the room, while Helen and Julyan were moving in the direction of the door. Lavernock, who had not advanced beyond the threshold, laid his hand on the latter's sleeve.

"Half a second, Colonel!" he said. "Go on, Helen; we'll be with you in no time."

Closing the door behind her, "I say, Colonel," he began, "I'm in a bit of a hole."

"Yes?" returned Julyan laconically.

"There isn't time to explain it all; but what it comes to is this. Are you enough of a Croesus to let me have a loan of a thousand by tomorrow morning?"

"No," answered Julyan as curtly as before.

"Oh, all right; then there's no more to be said. I thought I'd just chance it. I must pocket my pride and apply to Helen, that's all."

"Well," observed Julyan, "since your pocket appears to be empty, I daresay it will hold that diminutive deposit."

Lavernock's eyes flashed. "Damn it all, sir, if you won't help a friend, you needn't insult him!"

"My dear Lavernock," returned the other imperturbably, "you can't expect to get a thousand pounds for nothing, and you are probably aware that you will receive a cheque for that amount from me tomorrow morning, though I am not a Cræsus."

"It's only for a week or so," said Lavernock eagerly. "By bad luck, it happens that I must absolutely have the money tomorrow—I got a telegram about it just as I was leaving the theatre—and to save my life I couldn't raise a ten-pound note just now, unless somebody lent it me. You see the fact is——"

Julyan cut him short. "Never mind details; I don't want to hear them. I'll take care that you get the cheque the first thing in the morning."

Lavernock was really grateful, and looked so. "What an awfully good chap you are, Colonel!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you, Lavernock; I wish I could return the compliment. But a good chap doesn't borrow money of a woman. Not even of his future wife."

"It seems to me," said Lavernock, frowning again, "that if my cousin is willing to tide me over a temporary difficulty, that's her affair and mine. As for Helen's being my future wife, most likely you know that she refused me years ago. I haven't asked her again since my father died, and I'm not going to ask her."

Julyan did not believe that. He knew Lavernock very well, had a species of liking for him, and did not deny him certain merits. Veracity, however, was not amongst their number. It was practically certain that sooner or later Lavernock would propose to his cousin; only he might, in the meantime, make it practically

impossible for her to accept him. He certainly seemed to be using every effort towards that end.

"Well," remarked Julyan, "I won't say that you know your own business best, because I don't think you do; but perhaps I had better mind mine. Shall we go down to supper now?"

"Not if I know it!" responded a broad-shouldered, goodhumoured-looking man, with reddish hair and bright blue eyes, who stepped into the room just in time to overhear this suggestion. "I beg your pardon, Colonel Julyan, but that's exactly what I'm here to prevent Lord Lavernock from doing, and it's better luck than I expected to find only you with him."

"Hullo, Spurling!" said Lavernock; "what's up now?"

Surgeon-Major Spurling was much liked by the officers of the Fusilier Guards, to whom, in the plenitude of an unfailing, if slightly fussy, good nature, he rendered frequent services, medical and other.

"Why, a high old row," he answered. "At least, there'll be one presently unless you come away with me at once. Miss Vernon's at the door, in the worst sort of rage, and she swears that if I don't bring you out to her pretty quick, she'll come in and haul you out. You shouldn't have promised to sup with her, you know."

"Upon my soul," exclaimed Lavernock, furious, "this is the limit! I never promised to sup with her, and I won't see her. Tell her to go to——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the other soothingly; "a very good place for her, and I daresay she'll go there one of these days. But for the present, don't you see, the main thing is to get her out of this and prevent

her from making a disturbance before the waiters and everybody."

"What infernal, officious ass told her I was here?"

"I'm afraid I did," answered Spurling penitently. "You never warned me, when I saw you at the theatre, that it was a secret. Well, you know what she is. All I could do was to escort her to the door and persuade her to sit outside in the brougham while I fetched you. Come along; I'm sure Colonel Julyan will be so kind as to make some good excuse for you."

"Charmed!" said Julyan.

But Lavernock cast himself into a chair, thrust his hands into his pockets and stuck his legs straight out before him. He had at moments precisely the impulses and actions of a naughty, wilful schoolboy.

"I shan't stir," he announced; "I've had about as much of this sort of nonsense as I care to take. You may tell her from me that she has got to the end of my patience."

Lavernock was scarcely to be described as a patient person; but he was a second Job in comparison with Miss Margery Vernon, who never controlled, or attempted to control, herself when she was angry. And it did not take a great deal to make her angry either. Although she had allowed the well-intentioned Spurling five minutes in which to accomplish his mission, she found it impossible to sit quiescent in Piccadilly for more than three; so she discharged herself from her brougham like a torpedo, stormed across the hall and was upstairs and in Miss Monk's sitting-room before the scared waiter whom she had seized on her passage could recover breath enough to inquire her name. She burst upon the

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three men—a vision of pink satin, diamonds, whirling draperies, gleaming teeth and blazing eyes—and, making straight for Lavernock, gripped him by the shoulder, which she shook violently.

“Oh, you liar!” she panted. “Oh, you liar!”—— and seemed as if she could get out no more.

But if rage sometimes choked her for an instant, she never failed to recover her voice when anybody else tried to speak, and Spurling’s tentative effort at intervention had the effect of opening the flood-gates. Of the torrent of stammering, incoherent vituperation which followed a good deal was unintelligible to her hearers; but what seemed to be the matter was that Lavernock had promised not to go to supper with his cousin. And Miss Vernon didn’t care a snap of her fingers whether he had supper with his cousin or not, and it would be a jolly long time before his cousin asked him to supper again, because she was going to be told a few things which would make her open her eyes, and so was everybody else. And he was a dirty coward, and various other things, and Miss Vernon wished to God she had never set eyes on him, and she would stick a knife into him as soon as look at him, and she only wondered she hadn’t done so before now. And so forth, in accents of increasing shrillness, while Lavernock, with his hands in his pockets and his legs extended, answered never a word. At length Julyan took advantage of a momentary lull in the tempest to say suavely :

“My dear Miss Vernon, I think you are under a misapprehension. Lord Lavernock’s reason for coming here was that he wanted rather urgently to have a word

or two with me upon a small matter of business. So he followed us from the theatre."

Margery turned upon him like a viper. "Oh, I quite understand, Colonel Julyan! It would suit your book well enough to see Lavernock married to a rich woman, wouldn't it? Now that you have won all his money from him at cards, you wouldn't mind winning some of hers into the bargain."

"Drop it, Margery!" said Lavernock.

"I shall say just exactly what I please," she returned, though her wrath already showed signs of subsiding. "Colonel Julyan has done more to ruin you than any other man living, and I'm glad to have this opportunity of telling him what I think of him."

"I shall listen with interest and deference to your opinion of me, Miss Vernon," said Julyan, "and I dare say it will be good for my soul. But—don't you think it might wait? The present opportunity doesn't seem to be quite the best that could be selected for the purpose."

Margery, without replying, stared at him and then at Lavernock, who had risen to his feet. Either she was reassured or her passion had simply spent itself; for she now looked dazed and half ashamed. Spurling, who had been watching her with a practised professional eye, took Julyan by the elbow and drew him away to the open window, where they stood, looking out at the dark trees in the Park.

"Tears presently," he whispered; "then it'll be all right. Give them a minute or two to make it up."

Lavernock, however, showed no great anxiety to make it up. "I thought we should have something of this kind

before long," he was saying. "You're a most infernal fool, you know ; but that's your look-out. Everybody is to be treated to some eye-openers, eh ? Well—as you please. Only then I shall have nothing more to do with you, and, considering that I am pretty well broke as it is, you won't get much in the way of compensation."

"Why do you drive me to say such things ?" Margety whimpered. She was already weeping, and was quite unrecognisable as the termagant of a few minutes back.

"Drive you !" retorted Lavernock. "Good Lord ; if I could drive you, do you suppose you would be as out of hand as you are ? Do you suppose you would be here if I could drive you ?"

"I—I'm sorry," said she, with a gulp.

"Then prove it by clearing out."

Lavernock was not adroit, probably did not think it worth while to be. The woman's eyes began to glitter once more through her tears, and it was in a less submissive tone of voice that she rejoined, "I'll go if you'll come with me."

Spurling struck while the iron was hot. "I don't want to hurry you, Miss Vernon, but you and I are trespassers here, remember, and we don't particularly wish to be called upon to account for ourselves, do we ?"

"Good-night, Miss Vernon," said Julian politely.

She glanced doubtfully at the two men, then at Lavernock. "Are you coming or not ?" she asked.

"Oh, he's coming !—he's coming !" answered Julian and Spurling together.

Each of them seized Lavernock by an arm, he offered little resistance, and the whole group moved towards the door, through which, without another word, the half-reconciled pair were gently thrust.

"Got out of that better than I hoped for!" remarked Spurling, winking and rubbing his hands. "I'll wait just a minute, if you don't mind, so as to let them have a start. They're best left to themselves now. Besides, I've had about enough of them both for one evening."

"That woman will end in a lunatic asylum," observed Julyan meditatively.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, hysterics and insanity are two things. I don't say she's sane, but if it comes to that, precious few people are. Lord Lavernock certainly isn't, or he wouldn't have been brought to the verge of bankruptcy by his so-called friends."

"Of whom it appears that I am one," remarked Julyan smiling.

"Oh, I didn't mean you, Colonel!" protested the other. "I'm sure you've been as good a friend to him as anybody *can* be to a man who is absolutely determined to go to the dogs. If you have won his money, so have other people, and why shouldn't you take your share of what he is bound to lose?"

"That is so kind of you, Spurling," said Julyan, with an unmoved face. "Your view of the matter is most lenient and reasonable. However, I shall win no more money from Lavernock or anybody else, for I have decided that the time has come for me to give up cards altogether."

"Give up cards!" ejaculated Spurling, with jaws agape and the medical instinct at once aroused. "My dear Colonel, whereabouts do you feel it? If you have been consulting a specialist, let me assure you that they are not to be depended upon. A man fancies he has cancer or heart disease or something, and as soon as he begins to describe his symptoms——"

But this incipient diagnosis of Colonel Julyan's mental and physical condition was not allowed to proceed farther; for now the door was flung open by Miss Bligh, who advanced, exclaiming:

"What *have* you been about all this time, you two? Helen sends me to say that there is still some supper left for you, but that you can have it brought up here if you like. Oh, I beg your pardon!" she added, discovering that Lavernock had been replaced by a stranger.

"Miss Bligh," said Julyan, stepping forward, "may I introduce Surgeon-Major Spurling of my old battalion? Lavernock, I must tell you, is a patient of his, and he has come here, at some personal inconvenience, to order his patient home. You know what a tyrant a careful doctor is, and really, from what I understand, it was imperative that Miss Monk should be deprived of one of her guests. I was just going to take her his apologies."

Miss Bligh had been looking very hard at the intruder, who had returned her scrutiny. "We scarcely need an introduction, do we?" she asked. "We have met before, haven't we, Major Spurling?"

"Yes, ages ago," answered Spurling, with a somewhat embarrassed laugh. "I wonder at your doing me the honour to remember me."

"I have a rather good memory for faces," said Miss Bligh. "Yours quite comes back to me, though it was only at the budding stage of beauty in those old days, and now it's—shall we say full-blown? No, you don't!" she went on quickly, as Spurling opened his lips; "I can't allow you to make that retort, which is too obvious to be worthy of you. Never mind our respective looks; they can't be cured and must be endured. You look like the sort of man who wouldn't object to supper, anyhow; so come along and have some. Miss Monk will be delighted to see you."

Miss Monk, who entered at this moment, accompanied by Forrester, said what was polite and confirmatory when Major Spurling was presented to her; but of course she did not believe the rather lame story put forward by Julian to account for Lavernock's disappearance.

"Was he taken ill so suddenly that he had to send for you?" she inquired of the doctor.

Spurling made the best he could of it. "No, I wasn't sent for; I heard that he was here and I took the liberty of following him. You see, Miss Monk, there are some people to whom supper is downright deadly."

"I feel sure that you're not one of them," remarked Miss Bligh. "Neither am I, and I haven't nearly finished. Please take me down before they clear away."

She saw that something untoward must have occurred, and she deemed it best, for everybody's comfort, to come to the aid of a perplexed man. No doubt also she promised herself the satisfaction of ascertaining from him exactly what had occurred.

"Please excuse me, Miss Monk," Spurling proceeded, "for having intruded upon you in this very uncere-
monious way. Doctors, as I am sure you will
understand, are sometimes obliged to dispense with
ceremony."

"And patients too, it seems," observed Helen,
smiling a little frigidly. "I can only promise never
to ask my cousin to supper again."

Turning to Julyan, she said: "I am sorry you
should have been kept such a very long time without
food. Susie will take care of you now."

But Julyan, placed between two alternatives either
of which must land him in the position of a superfluous
third person, decided to reply that although he was
not a patient of his friend Spurling's, he would cer-
tainly be forbidden to eat supper if he were. After
all, it was not likely that Helen was eager for a *tête-à-
tête* with Forrester.

CHAPTER X

AT A VENTURE

It was not quite so certain as Julyan supposed that Helen had no wish to be left with Forrester, who personified that type of Englishman which commended itself above all others to her taste. She liked men to be simple, athletic, healthy in mind and body ; no doubt also she liked them to be amenable, and to demand, tacitly or otherwise, the fostering care of the less simple sex. More than once of late she had thought that if she had been a girl like the ordinary run of girls, if events had not caused her to feel so much older than she was, and if her destiny had not been inexorably mapped out for her, she might easily enough have returned sentiments which had been avowed, though not yet uttered.

In any case, she did not want just then to talk to Colonel Julyan. It was that luckless man's misfortune—it can hardly be said to have been his fault—that he had several times appeared to be quietly taking charge of Miss Monk, and there was nothing that Miss Monk disliked and resented quite so much as that. She concluded that it was he who had sent her cousin away. Why he had done so, and what had taken

place during her absence downstairs, Helen neither knew nor greatly cared to inquire ; though the doctor's statement was a palpable fabrication. Very likely Lavernock had been drinking again, and there had appeared to be some danger in letting him approach a champagne bottle ; but even so, it was not Colonel Julyan's business to play the policeman with her guests. What irritated her in a man whom she would have been glad to like, and did for many reasons like, was what she very unfairly stigmatised in her own mind as a perpetual tendency to overdo things. She did not ask or wish her acquaintances to take headers into the sea in quest of a submerged trinket ; she did not wish them to change the whole scheme of their lives at a word from her ; she did not wish them to shield her from possible annoyance by the exercise of some power or authority which she had never conferred upon them. Something like that, at least, was the explanation that she gave herself of an irresistible desire to snub Colonel Julyan ; yet it is probable that there was another and a stronger incentive in the background which she chose to ignore. Never for one moment had Julyan made love to her ; his demeanour had been irreproachable, his attitude ostentatiously paternal. Still, the fact remained that he did love her, and although women may ignore a fact of that kind, it is seldom indeed that they are ignorant of it.

So poor Julyan was snubbed. Not sharply nor rudely nor in any way of which notice could be taken ; only he was given to understand that Miss Monk was rather tired, and, as he was never slow to accept a hint, he was out of the room in less than five minutes. As

soon as he had gone, Helen turned to Forrester, who was sitting beside her, and said, with a slight grimace :

"My little attempt at a merry evening hasn't been much of a success, has it?"

"Oh, don't you think so?" he returned, looking surprised and disappointed. "I'm awfully sorry you don't. Speaking for myself, all I can say is I've had a first-rate time. But then, of course, I'm bound to have a first-rate time whenever I'm in your company."

Helen laughed. One man may steal a horse while another must not look over a hedge, and what was offensive in Colonel Julyan was not so, it appeared, in Captain Forrester.

"How I wish I were you!" she ejaculated half involuntarily.

"I wish to goodness you were!" was his fervent rejoinder. "Just for a few minutes, at least; because then you would know——"

He was interrupted before he could commit himself further.

"Life for you," Helen went on, "must be such a perfectly straightforward, thoroughly enjoyable affair!"

"Oh, I don't know so much about that," answered Forrester, shaking his head, for he was a little too young to like being classed as elementary. "One has one's worries, I assure you."

"Not very bad ones, are they? Not as bad as mine, at any rate."

"Well, you see," replied the young man gravely, "I can't tell what yours are." Then, after a pause, he looked up, smiling all over his face, as his pleasant

habit was, and, "Do you know what my old governor always says?" he asked. "He says ninety per cent. of people's troubles are either of their own making or their own imagining."

"I fancy that that view has been taken by other observers besides your old governor; but I am glad to hear that he adopts it, because that shows that the world must have treated him pretty well. I think even he would have to include my troubles in his small ten per cent. margin, though."

"All of them? You were saying that this evening hasn't been a success, and I suppose you mean that things have happened which have put you out. But isn't it possible that they have been more or less imaginary?"

She threw a quick look at him. "I am afraid you can't persuade me of that," she answered. "It is over now, and it doesn't signify; but it was extremely disagreeable at the time, and of course I shouldn't have gone to the theatre if I had had any idea of what was coming."

But it appeared that the glaringly obvious had somehow escaped Forrester's detection as well as Miss Bligh's. "The theatre?" he repeated vaguely. "You thought it a vulgar sort of show, perhaps? Yes, I suppose it is a bit vulgar."

He meditated regretfully for a moment upon a vulgarity which seemed to comprise his personal appreciation of the "show"; then resumed: "I thought it might be that you weren't quite pleased with Laverdock's way of going on."

"I wasn't," she confessed, "and I don't think you

can say that his way of going on left much to my imagination either. But why should we talk about him? We were talking about you, who make a much nicer subject."

"Ah, if you were only in earnest!" sighed the young man. "If you really thought me a nice subject to talk about!"

"Really I do."

He made a deprecating gesture. "Not in the way that I mean, I'm afraid. You have a sort of good-natured liking for me, I believe; but what's the use of that?"

"I hope you don't object to being liked."

"Well, I do and I don't. It's a poor consolation to be told you're liked when you want to be loved. There!—now it's out! Miss Monk, I won't say a word about your being so tremendously rich, because I'm sure you understand that that has nothing at all to do with it. I'm pretty well off myself, if it signified, and I'm an only son. Of course you're just about a thousand times too good for me; that's the trouble. But then you're a thousand times too good for any man living, and—well, at all events I'll swear there's no man living who can love you more than I do."

This was the first time that Eustace Forrester had made an offer of marriage, and he may not have been very skilful in his method of setting about it. But if his tongue lacked eloquence, his honest young face did not, and Helen, who had already declined several proposals without a twinge of compassion or compunction, felt so genuinely sorry at having to refuse him that she was less unequivocal than she intended to be in her reply.

Forrester had drawn his bow at a venture, fully prepared to miss the mark ; he had not expected Helen to throw herself into his arms ; permission to go on adoring her was the most that he had hoped for, and he clutched so joyously at her rather injudicious admission that she did not love anybody else that it became necessary to be more explicit with him.

"Ah, but it doesn't follow that I shall not marry somebody else," she said, and in a few direct words she laid bare her situation to him. "It can't be called a dilemma," she remarked in conclusion, with a doleful little smile, "because it hasn't got two horns. I'm afraid it can't even be called a problem. There's only one thing for me to do, and I may be required to do it any day."

Her lover was not at all impressed. He had heard about the late Lord Lavernock's will and knew what people were saying as to the present Lord Lavernock's chances of profiting under it ; but that Helen Monk should play the part of Iphigenia and submit to be sacrificed in order to propitiate the shade of an old gentleman who did not seem to have known very accurately what he himself wanted was surely the height of absurdity. He said as much, adding :

"I quite agree with you that this is no dilemma, and if it's a unicorn, what earthly reason is there for impaling yourself upon it ? Supposing the old man did mean his son to have the money some day, why not let him have it at once ? Lord knows we shouldn't grudge it !—I mean you wouldn't grudge it."

Helen observed that although there might be some room for doubt as to her uncle's precise intentions, the

course suggested could be nothing but a blank defiance of them. She also said—as indeed she believed—that her cousin had been, in a manner, bequeathed to her. It had been thought, rightly or wrongly, that she alone could save him, and that he was in pressing need of rescue was what nobody could deny. Forrester did not deny it; so upon that basis they argued the question for a while. Naturally, neither of them convinced the other; but Helen noted, with appreciation, the loyalty and generosity of her would-be suitor. Under the circumstances, it might have been permissible to allude to Miss Margery Vernon, as well as to Lavernock's habit of intemperance; perhaps most men would have considered themselves justified in doing so. Forrester did not. He took no unfair advantages, told no tales out of school and confined himself to ringing changes upon the sound proposition that it can never be right for a woman to marry a man whom she does not love.

It was somehow pleasant and soothing and refreshing to listen to him. It is always pleasant to listen to people who speak what they believe to be the truth from their hearts, do not know the meaning of sophistry and apply common sense as a solvent to all the difficulties of existence. Forrester, however, did not touch upon the particular difficulty which troubled Helen, not having been informed of it. What distressed and alarmed her was her growing repugnance for her cousin, not the mere fact—to her scarcely a deterrent—that she was not in love with him. Julian's analysis of her was so far correct that she had no inclination for matrimony in the abstract. Once, during her unfledged girlhood, she had been in love, or had

fancied herself in love, with her handsome young cousin; but the last spark of that unrequited passion had died out before he in his turn had become attracted by her, and since then she had never felt the least wish to marry anybody. Forrester, it is true, gave her a wistful, yearning impression of having missed something, possibly the very best thing that life has to bestow; and this may have caused her to extend to him, quite unwittingly, what he, in his eagerness to snatch at straws, took for encouragement.

"I'm not going to give in before I'm beat," were his last words to her, "and I shan't think myself beat until you really care for some other man. As for your marrying Lavernock, I don't believe you'll ever do that—if it were only because our good Miss Bligh will never let you."

Good Miss Bligh, though she had a strongish will of her own, had been forced to recognise that she could neither lead nor drive her former pupil. She was, indeed, at that very moment lamenting this in conversation with Surgeon-Major Spurling, who had been quickly admitted into her confidence.

"So we meet again after all these years!" she began, as she seated herself opposite to him at the supper-table. "No lingering vestige of ill-feeling, I trust?"

"My dear lady," the cheery Surgeon-Major protested, "for what do you take me? It is rather more than a decade, I believe, since you were pleased to declare our engagement at an end, and you will recollect that I didn't quarrel with your decision at the time."

"I recollect that you argued about it a good deal

at the time; but it was just because you were so insufferably argumentative and dictatorial that we had to part."

Spurling threw up a massive pair of hands. "I argumentative! I dictatorial! Was there ever such a ludicrous example of putting the saddle on the wrong horse! Ah, Susan, Susan, time hasn't altered you, I see!"

"At the period of which we are speaking," said Miss Bligh, shaking her forefinger at him, "I was the meek, timid daughter of a country parson, with only just spirit enough to say 'Bo!' to the goose that you were. Time has improved me into a woman who isn't much afraid of you or anybody else, but who really can't be troubled to fight old battles over again."

"Did you say 'Bo!' to me?"

"I said 'No' to you anyhow."

"Not at first. You said 'Yes' at first, if you remember. I'm not complaining; I only mention it in the interest of historical accuracy."

"History be bothered! Have some champagne, David, and let us enjoy the fleeting hour. We ought to be friends; for we owe one another our liberty."

"Very true. You have prospered, I hope?"

Miss Bligh shrugged her shoulders. "That depends upon whether a paid companion is to be described as a prosperous person or not. The position doesn't sound ideal, still it suits me, because I happen to be devoted to Helen Monk. Your turn now. How has life treated you?"

"Oh, not too badly. Here I am, a Surgeon-Major, attached to the first battalion of the Fusilier Guards—

attached to it in every sense. It doesn't mean exactly wealth and fame, but it does mean congenial company, and it provides me incidentally with some queer patients."

"Such as Lavernock, for instance?"

"Well, yes; as a patient Lord Lavernock has interesting phases."

"Drink?"

"Not so much that as nerves. But really I mustn't divulge professional secrets."

"Oh, yes, you must, David. That is, if they are likely to be of any use to me. Of course you know, as everybody does, that his father disinherited him in favour of Helen."

Spurling nodded. "The idea being that Miss Monk was to marry her cousin and keep control over the purse-strings. There's something to be said for that scheme, mind you, because Lavernock would manage to get rid of the largest fortune in the world; still I can't think myself that it is ever wise to put a woman in authority."

"Ah, that's you all over, David! Not that you signify. What signifies immensely is that Helen regards it as a solemn and sacred duty to accept her cousin if he proposes to her, and that she pays no more attention to all the sensible things I have to say to her upon the subject than she would to a parrot chattering. In a general way of speaking, I flatter myself that I can make people listen to me; but I know my limitations—that's a sign of true greatness, isn't it?—and I tell you frankly that I can do nothing with Helen."

"You're opposed to the match, then?"

"Bless me, what a silly question! Haven't I told you that I'm devoted to Helen? And you know something about Lavernock."

"Yes, I know a good deal about him. Well, I'll go so far as to say that I don't wonder at your objections, and I'll tell you one thing, for your comfort. I think it's quite doubtful whether Lord Lavernock will ask Miss Monk to marry him. There are—complications."

"They don't amount to much, I'm afraid," returned Miss Bligh. "He himself told me in so many words that he was not going to ask her; but there's never any depending upon what he says. It was a pose, I suspect. As for Miss Margery Vernon, she's only a complication on sufferance."

"You wouldn't think so, my dear Susan, if you had seen her half an hour ago. You were as near seeing her as no matter, I can tell you, and between ourselves, you may thank your humble servant that you didn't."

He then gave a succinct account of the scene which has been described, and Miss Bligh was much interested.

"So that was what brought you here!" she cried. "I was going to ask you for the interpretation of your cock-and-bull yarn, but I forgot. Well, this may be rather important. Lavernock is afraid of the woman, you say?"

"No, I don't say that; I fancy that in her quieter moments she is rather afraid of him. But she holds him—Heaven knows how or why! You can't account for these infatuations, though they're common enough. Margery and Lord Lavernock fight like cat and dog; you would think they must be dead tired of one another. Yet—they don't part."

"Any chance of his marrying her?"

"Not the very slightest, I should imagine. What you may reasonably hope for is that he won't marry anybody else yet awhile. And the best thing you can do is to get Miss Monk to marry somebody else as soon as possible."

"Get her to marry somebody else! Much as I might get her to buy a new hat, I suppose? There is, as it happens, one person whom I wish with all my heart that she would marry, and who—but no; I won't talk to you about him. You're too unintelligent, and I know beforehand just what you would say."

"You mean young Forrester perhaps?"

"No, I don't mean young Forrester; but it doesn't matter. In her present frame of mind she would refuse anybody and everybody except her cousin. Well, I must see whether telling her of Miss Margery Vernon's raid will have any effect. It may."

"Allow me to remind you, Susan, that I informed you of that incident in confidence."

"Did you? But I never promised to treat it as a confidential communication. By the way, don't you think it would sound rather better if you were to address me as Miss Bligh?"

"I'll make a point of doing so for the future."

"Don't forget, please. Well, I was going to say that I really can't afford to be particular. I have got to avert a tragedy by hook or by crook. I suppose you'll admit that it would be a tragedy if Helen were to marry her cousin."

"I think it might be," Spurling answered rather gravely. "Lavernock is——"

"No need to tell me what he is. Now, David—or rather Major Spurling—if you should be able to lend me a hand, may I count upon you?"

"Certainly you may; although I don't at present see——"

"Neither do I; but perhaps I shall. Nothing more to eat or drink? Then I'll say goodnight. Look us up again soon, won't you? I have a feeling that you're safe and that you may be helpful—if only as an old friend to whom I can freely curse and swear, when I like, at the perversity of young friends."

"It will be a pleasure and a privilege to serve you in any capacity, however humble, my dear Miss Bligh," responded the gallant Surgeon-Major, with a valedictory bow.

CHAPTER XI

JULYAN RECEIVES THANKS AND CONFIDENCES

HELEN had retired to bed when Miss Bligh went upstairs; so it was only at breakfast the next morning that the true reason of Lavernock's flight was revealed to her. She gratified her informant by shuddering slightly and looking disgusted; but she did not seem disposed to blame her cousin for what had occurred.

"Poor fellow!" was her first comment.

"Oh, I grant you that he is a poor fellow," said Miss Bligh. "If he weren't a very poor fellow indeed, he would have sent that impudent hussy flying in double quick time. But if you're sorry for a man who doesn't know how to protect himself and you from such outrages, all I can say is that your pity might be better bestowed."

"I am sorry for him," Helen confessed. "He couldn't have foreseen that he would be pursued here, and I doubt whether any man could order, or persuade, Miss Vernon to go away against her will."

"Two men did it without much difficulty. You may thank Colonel Julyan and Major Spurling that we didn't

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have her waltzing into the supper room and screeching the house down."

"I hope they don't expect to be thanked, for really the subject is too unpleasant to be talked about. By the way, Susie, who is your friend Major Spurling?"

Miss Bligh smiled complacently. "A former admirer. I did have admirers formerly, Helen, strange as it may seem to you. Indeed I can boast of having had as many as three at the same time; for, in addition to David Spurling, there was the Squire of the parish, a widower with seven children, and also the curate, who honourably explained that in his case admiration couldn't lead to business, owing to insufficient means. David had no means to speak of either; but that didn't prevent us from becoming valiantly engaged. Then we fell out, in consequence of his domineering disposition, and off he went to London to seek his fortune—which he doesn't appear to have found—as a doctor. Soon afterwards my poor father died, and I had the luck to be engaged as your governess, my dear. One doesn't always recognise one's luck at the moment. I remember to have shed tears over my ruddy David, though I gather that he didn't cry for his Susanna long. He and I shook hands last night and told one another how thankful we were that we hadn't made it up in years gone by, as we might have done if we had known where to write to. These encounters," continued Miss Bligh impressively, "bring home to one the great truth that there would be scarcely any marriages at all if the young could be vouchsafed a vision of what their partners were going to look like towards middle age. Now, if you

were only to see Lavernock as he is bound to be some ten years hence——”

Helen checked her with an uplifted hand. “Thank you, Susie, but I think the sight of him as he is now would do, if anything could do.”

It was not, in truth, a question of what Lavernock looked like or was going to look like. There was not even much question as to what he would eventually demand. Helen was under no illusion about him. Impending bankruptcy would triumph over compunctious scruples and all other restraining influences; even over Miss Margery Vernon, formidable though that latter hindrance would doubtless contrive to be. Colonel Julyan, it was true, was of opinion that he would allow himself to be pensioned, and Colonel Julyan seemed to have taken his measure with some precision. Every now and then Helen had an impulse to ask Colonel Julyan for advice; but then he always put her off by going beyond his instructions and seeming to lay her under obligations which she had not meant to incur. Of course it was Colonel Julyan (for the red-headed Army surgeon had not much the air of a diplomatist) who had saved her from vociferous intrusion on the previous evening, and of course it had been kind of him to do so, if a trifle officious. Yes, officious was the word. It was his deferential officiousness that just spoilt him as a friend.

The above somewhat infelicitous appreciation gave Helen comfort; for her conscience had begun to reproach her with having been both uncivil and ungrateful to her guest, and she was not at all sure that she ought not to ask his pardon. However, as it chanced, no immediate

occasion of offering apologies to Colonel Julyan or withholding them from him was granted to her, inasmuch as nearly a week elapsed before she saw him again. It was at one of those afternoon crushes in South Audley Street which symbolised official hospitality to visitors from the Colonies that Helen found herself once more rubbing elbows with one who had not been seen at an entertainment of that description for years. She greeted him with a cordiality which was partly due to surprise.

"Who," she exclaimed, "would have expected to come across you, of all people, in this crowd of strange beings!"

"Nobody, I should think," he answered, laughing. "On the other hand, anybody might have had a sanguine expectation of coming across you in this house. So that explains me, as you may recollect that it explained me once before."

"Oh!" said Helen, in a somewhat colder tone of voice. But then, reflecting that she had, after all, no quarrel with Colonel Julyan, "Why have you not been to see us?" she asked.

He made no reply, but suggested that they might be able to hear one another speak if they stepped aside from the surging flow and ebb of humanity which had Lady Elizabeth Barton's hook nose for its high-water mark. So presently they found comparative privacy in the same small anteroom which they had utilised on a previous occasion, and then Helen, who always expected people to answer when spoken to, repeated her question.

"If I were to obey my own inclinations," Julyan

confessed, "I should be inquiring whether you were at home every day of the week; but one of the things which a man of my age ought never to lose sight of is that he is much more likely than not to be a bore."

"Don't you think," said Helen, "that you rather overdo this perpetual insistence upon your age? You make me suspect that it is a form of vanity—of self-consciousness anyhow."

"Now that you mention it, I shouldn't wonder if it was, Miss Monk. But if at least it preserves me from being a bore?"

"Take care that it doesn't make you one! And by your own admission you are not quite as modest as you try to appear, for you said just now that you came here on purpose to meet me."

"Ah, but I had a reason and an excuse for that. I was wondering what you and Miss Bligh were going to do about Ascot next week, and whether, if you haven't made any other arrangement, you would let me motor you down there on the Tuesday and Thursday. Lavernock and Forrester are going to stay for the week with me at my little cottage on the river, and——"

"But then how could you motor us down from London?" interrupted Helen.

"Quite easily. There will be another motor at Maidenhead for them, and we should all meet on the course. The idea I had in my head was that you might perhaps do me the honour to dine with me at our riverside club after the racing, and then you could return to London by train."

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It was an idea which struck Helen as decidedly more attractive than the alternative with which she was threatened of joining Aunt Elizabeth's large party. Moreover, Miss Bligh had not been included in her ladyship's invitation. Nobody except Colonel Julyan ever seemed to give a thought to poor pleasure-loving Miss Bligh. So, after brief consideration, she answered :

"Thank you very much ; I think we should both enjoy it."

"That's settled, then," said Julyan, "and if there's time after dinner, you might care to come and inspect my humble dwelling. The garden isn't much larger than this room, but it has some rather good roses in it just now."

He went on talking about roses and herbaceous borders and so forth ; for he knew that his companion was a keen gardener. But he made no allusion whatever to the evening which had been so near to ending most disagreeably for her, and although she would have been angry with him if he had, she could not but appreciate his discreet abstention. So much so, indeed, that after a time she herself abruptly introduced the subject.

"I ought to thank you," said she, "for having prevailed upon my cousin and Miss Vernon to go away from the hotel the other night. I should have thanked you at the time, only I didn't know then."

Julyan frowned. "You ought never to have known at all. Who told you ? Not Lavernock ?"

"No ; I haven't seen him since. Major Spurling told Susie, who told me."

"Ah, that's the worst of Spurling! An excellent man in many ways; but he can't hold his tongue."

"He doesn't resemble his former Colonel there," remarked Helen, suddenly turning her head towards her neighbour and smiling.

"You mean?"

"Oh, I daresay you are quite right, and it doesn't really matter. Still, a hint might have been given to me not to go to that theatre."

"Did you—mind?" asked Julyan, a little puzzled.

"I did rather. Oh, not because of Lavernock; his private affairs are nothing to me. But that woman—well, you were at the back of the box, and perhaps you didn't see. Perhaps you wouldn't have seen from the front of it; for neither Susie nor Captain Forrester did."

Julyan looked distressed. "I did see what happened," he said. "Margery Vernon is a jealous little virago, with the instincts of a gutter snipe. If I had had the least idea that she would behave as she did at the theatre and afterwards, I would certainly have tried to prevent you from going; though I know I should have been knocked down and trampled upon for my pains. Now, isn't that true, Miss Monk?"

Helen laughed and acknowledged that it was. If there were moments when she disliked Colonel Julyan, there were also moments when she quite liked him, and this was one of them. "I take back my words," she said; "you couldn't have stopped me from going to the theatre. It's a hard matter, when one comes to think of it, to stop anybody from doing anything. Is Lavernock gambling as much as ever?"

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"I can't tell you," answered Julyan. "There is a certain club at which he and I used to play. I don't go there any more."

"Does he know why you don't?"

"I believe he knows that I have forsworn cards; it is scarcely likely to have struck him that I am offering myself as a bright example."

Helen smiled and sighed. "No, of course not; that's just it," said she. "But I'm not ungrateful to you," she added quickly.

Now this was a good deal of a concession, and what caused her to make it she might have been at a loss to explain. Something in the man's face perhaps—a subdued wistfulness and mute deprecation of undeserved snubs, which pierced rather pathetically through the high, cool self-possession of a social veteran. Julyan, however, was not at all conscious of conveying that impression. He was not, indeed, thinking of himself, being, as always when in Helen's vicinity, otherwise engrossed. His constant scrutiny of her had not told him much of a nature to raise his spirits, and he parted from her presently with a sense of failure. Although she had been gracious this time, he divined that she did not wholly trust him and had little belief in his disinterested friendship. She would not consult him in a crisis; she would dispose of her life according to her own ideas; and her ideas with reference to her entirely worthless cousin began to be disquieting. Margery Vernon had given her a shock; but Lavernock evidently had not. Knowing all that she knew about Lavernock, she remained to all appearance unshaken in her intention to marry him if he should ask her. "And it stands to

reason that he'll do that," Julyan ruefully reflected, as he let himself into the flat in the St. James's district which was his London home.

Somebody, seated in his armchair, was blowing clouds of smoke towards the ceiling; somebody with a sleek, black head and outstretched legs, who said, on his entrance:

"They told me you would be back to dress for dinner, Colonel, so I thought I'd wait. I—er—I didn't half thank you for that loan of a thousand that you were so good as to let me have."

Julyan laughed. "I'm quite sure you aren't here to finish thanking me, Lavernock—come!"

Lavernock also laughed a little. "Well, no," he admitted; "there's something else."

He got up, wandered about the room in his restless, nervous way, pitched his cigarette out of the window, thrust his hands into his pockets, examined one of the pictures for a moment, then wheeled round and resumed his seat.

"The fact of the matter is, Colonel, that I want to have your advice. It's about Margery Vernon."

"The only advice I can give you is to chuck her," answered Julyan succinctly. "It means a storm, which you will have to weather as best you can; but there's nothing else for it, except her chucking you, which she seems unwilling to do."

"She can't," said Lavernock gloomily. "I can't chuck her either. She happens to be my wife."

"The deuce she does!" ejaculated Julyan, with uplifted brows. "I'm very sorry for this, Lavernock."

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"I don't suppose you are," returned Lavernock, with one of his quick frowns; "I don't see how you can be. You know now that I was speaking the truth when I told you, the other night, that I should never ask Helen to marry me, and you're uncommonly glad of that, I suspect."

"Well, I'm glad of that," Julyan owned; "but I'm very sorry for you, all the same. What could have made you do such a thing!"

Lavernock shrugged his shoulders. "It isn't the first time that such a thing has been done. One always wonders how any other man can be such an ass; but one isn't astonished at oneself. Another thing—I daresay you won't believe it, but it's a fact that I was awfully fond of Helen, and when she made it quite clear that she would never have anything to say to me of her own accord, I felt like doing something desperate. Anyhow, there were days when I felt like that, and Margery, who wanted me to marry her—God knows why!—took advantage of one of them. We were married at a registry office a short time before the governor died. Just my luck!"

It had to be admitted that his luck was not good, however little deserving of sympathy he might be, and however much a friend of Helen's must needs rejoice that she had nothing more to fear from him. But his request for advice seemed a little tardy.

"I'm sorry for you, Lavernock," Julyan repeated. "I'm afraid you have put yourself beyond reach of help, though. As you yourself say, you can't get rid of your wife."

"Well, that's as may be. There's no legal machinery for compelling a man to live with his wife."

"She can obtain an order for restitution of conjugal rights if he deserts her."

"Oh, I know. You don't obey the order, that's all. It isn't the difficulty of getting rid of Margery that puts me up a tree just now; it's that she's beginning to insist upon being publicly acknowledged."

"I wonder she didn't insist before."

"Well, she has fits of being open to reason. Of course it would have been madness to make our marriage known while my father lived, and when she heard about the will, she saw that it would be good policy to keep things dark a little longer."

"I may be stupid," said Julyan, "but I can't understand why."

"For the very simple reason that I owe any amount of money, and that my creditors won't press me while they think there is a prospect of my marrying a great heiress."

"Oh! And now, I suppose, Margery has taken it into her head to be jealous of the heiress whom you can't marry."

"That's it. Idiotic, if you like; but most women are idiots when they aren't maniacs, and Margery is both by turns. There's a sort of excuse for her too. Once or twice, when she has made me lose my temper with her, I've said things about myself and Helen which happened to be true—you can imagine the kind of things. So now she swears she is going to have her

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rights, and she doesn't care a little hang whether I'm ruined or not."

"I see. Well, my advice to you is to go straight to your cousin and make a clean breast of it."

"Oh, I'm not going to do *that!*" exclaimed Lavernock, in surprised disgust. "I call that rotten advice!"

"Nevertheless, I believe it's the best thing you can do. Whether your father meant you to marry Miss Monk or not I don't know. Personally, I shouldn't think so, but she does, and she would have been capable of obeying if it had been possible. Now that it is impossible, she will certainly wish to indemnify you."

"What do you call indemnifying me?" asked Lavernock, frowning again.

"In plain language, I mean that she will wish to make over some part of her inheritance to you. I don't say that she is in the least bound to do anything of the sort; only I am pretty sure that she will consider herself bound. So, if I were you, I wouldn't put off any longer what can't in any case be put off very long."

Not to everybody could such counsel be safely offered; but Julyan had some grounds for assuming that his former comrade in arms was not over fastidious. However, Lavernock's code of ethics was always an uncertain quantity, and he chose to spurn this notion as grossly insulting to him. Allow himself to be pensioned by Helen?—he would sooner starve! It was true that he had borrowed a little money of her; she had almost forced it upon him. But if he could only

tide over Ascot, and perhaps Goodwood, he would be able to repay her, and he would certainly take care that she had precedence over his other creditors. Only, on account of those other creditors, it was of the last importance that the fact of his being a married man should remain secret.

"Well, but it seems to me," objected Julyan, "that in not telling that fact, as a secret, to your cousin you run the risk of her being publicly informed of it through Margery."

"That's exactly the point," Lavernock answered. "I can't trust Margery a yard. Still, so long as she knows I'm not with Helen, and doesn't see me speaking to her, she may hold her tongue, and, to keep her quiet, I haven't been near Ritz's since that evening. But now there's Ascot coming on, and——"

"Is Margery going to Ascot?"

"Oh, Lord, yes! Well, I can't actually cut Helen, who will be going down with the Bartons, I suppose; but I mean to keep out of her way as much as I can, and I thought perhaps you might help me."

"Help you to avoid her. That won't be easy, I'm afraid. As a matter of fact, I offered, half an hour ago, to take Miss Monk and Miss Bligh down in my motor, and the offer was accepted."

"So much the better! That means that Forrester and I go over from your place on our own, and even if we do meet on the course, it won't look as if we were one party."

"I ought to mention," said Julyan, "that Miss Monk is dining with me on Tuesday evening at the Club, and

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there was some talk of her coming on afterwards to inspect my garden."

"Oh, that's different!" exclaimed Lavernock quickly; "that won't do at all! Margery is dining with me; she hasn't got to appear at the theatre that evening, and I couldn't shake her off. So if she were to get wind of Helen's being in the house where I was staying, the fat would be in the fire to a dead certainty. There's no necessity for Helen to look at your garden in the dark, is there?"

"None at all; only I made the suggestion, and she may remind me of it."

"Oh, you'll get out of that easily enough. Now, Colonel, you see how things are with me. At the present moment I'm in a tightish place; but with anything like ordinary luck I ought to rake in a fair amount of money before the autumn, and until then I've got to muzzle Margery if I can."

"I don't think you will," said Julian.

"I believe I shall, unless she flies into one of her blind ruries, as she did the other night. She may pretend not to care whether I'm broke or not, but of course she does really, and she knows as well as I do that the writers are only holding their hands because they expect me to be a rich man before long. There's just one thing that might knock me over; Helen might engage herself to somebody."

"She might," Julian assented, "if she were to hear of your marriage. Otherwise she won't, unless I am very much mistaken in her."

Lavernock grinned. "Well—there you are! Don't

you see that I should be a born fool to let her hear of it?"

His peculiar system of morality exhibited itself again. Who was to guess what line of conduct he would adopt or what he would hold inadmissible? But his face clouded over once more as he resumed:

"How about Forrester? He's always in her pocket nowadays."

"I don't think Forrester can be said to constitute a danger," answered Julyan, smiling; for in truth he did not think so. "Miss Monk's future husband will hardly be of Forrester's type."

"Well," observed Lavernock, his brow clearing, "it's rather a relief to hear you say that. I shouldn't like to see Helen thrown away upon a self-satisfied, priggish young ass like Forrester. Not that it makes any odds to me; she's welcome to please herself. All I care about is that she should remain unattached for the next two or three months."

Was that really all that he cared about? He went away without saying much more and without having obtained any advice, save that which he had so emphatically rejected. His visit and his revelation had doubtless been prompted by various motives; but Julyan, thinking him over, suspected that sheer jealousy of Forrester (who, whatever he might be, had never been called priggish or self-satisfied before) was not the least potent of them. There were redeeming traits in Lavernock's shift, incongruous, eminently unsafe character, and if amid the *débris* of so many indulged passions and unabashed infidelities there survived a genuine love for his cousin, it was not Julyan who

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could refuse him some measure of commiseration and sympathy. But indeed it would have taken a harder heart than Colonel Julyan's to grudge pity to a man who was no longer in any sense formidable and who was tied for life to Margery Vernon.

CHAPTER XII

STRAIGHT TALK

GIGANTIC diamonds, white elephants, family mansions, in St. James's Square or elsewhere—all these are quite pleasant assets to come into the hands of a young woman, provided that they are readily convertible into cash. If not, they are apt to present themselves rather in the light of embarrassing burdens and to demand of her with ponderous irony what she proposes to do with them. What Helen proposed to do with the London house which she had always disliked and which, despite refurbishing, retained obstinately an aspect of stern grandeur from which the far larger Wiltshire mansion was wholly exempt, was to live in it. That course was clearly indicated; but she told her companion, with a sigh, after the installation had been effected, that she did not believe it would ever be possible to feel at home there.

"It looks as if it wished me to understand that it only exists for purposes of entertainment," she remarked.

"Then you'll have to give it what it asks for," returned Miss Bligh cheerfully. "But to my mind it asks in much louder tones for a master."

"I should be only too glad to propitiate the monster

with that gift," observed Helen, laughing forlornly, "if I knew how to do it without including myself in the transaction."

"I hope the day will come when you will be only too glad to include yourself," was Miss Bligh's oracular response. "Don't you be in a hurry, though. The house can wait ; so can you, and so can he."

"He" (if Miss Bligh had alluded to Lavernock, as of course she did not,) seemed both willing to wait and not unlikely to be impeded in any advances that he might see fit to make. On the morning after Helen had moved into the residence which had so few attractions for her she received a letter the apparent object of which was to convince her that she would do well to keep it for her own use.

"You may flatter yourself," this uncereemonious missive began, "that you did a clever thing when you got that old uncle of yours to leave you money and property that ought to have gone to somebody else ; but that's just where you make a mistake. Lord Lavernock isn't going to marry you either for love or for money, and you can take this as a straight tip from one who knows. You aren't very proud, trying so hard to catch a man who doesn't mean to be caught and who wouldn't cross the street to speak to you if you didn't keep on beckoning to him. Anybody can see that you're in love with him ; but that isn't going to help you much, you may depend upon it. There isn't any sort of use in your making eyes at him and telling him you would like him to have what should be his by rights and all that stuff. *You won't get him*, and it's only fair you should know that unless you have the

sense to take warning and drop such foolery, trouble will come of it both for him and for you. This is told you for your own good."

The letter, written in a large, sprawling hand, was anonymous, but might just as well have been signed in full. Helen, who could feel no doubt as to her correspondent's identity, perused the sheet twice, then tore it up into very small pieces, which she consigned to the waste-paper basket. For women of Margery Vernon's class, (of whom, to be sure, she knew next to nothing), she had the half-compassionate contempt which is common amongst women of her own. That Margery should misconstrue the situation was, she supposed, natural enough; that a Margery Vernon should resort to spiteful abuse and childish menaces was probably likewise natural. The incident might, and would, have been dismissed as beneath notice, had Helen been able to forget the singularly unpleasant, vaguely sinister impression which she had received at the theatre. But this remained present to her and forbade her to regard her assailant as wholly negligible. Whatever else Margery Vernon might be, she was bold, revengeful, potentially dangerous. Her face, her voice, her whole bearing suggested tragedy of the baser sort—a knife or a revolver, whipped out to an accompaniment of yelling laughter. Not being constitutionally timid, Helen had no fear for herself; but she had some for Lavernock. Fear for him and also of him; fear lest he should strain her endurance to snapping point, (for somehow the repellent aspect under which he had displayed himself to her of late was enhanced by an episode for which he was in no way answerable); fear lest he should at any

moment claim what could not be refused him without disloyalty to his father.

So it was all rather complicated, and if Helen did not know what to wish for, perhaps there are not a great many people who, in her place, would have known either. Colonel Julyan could have told her that she need not wish for anything at all, seeing that control over her cousin's future had been taken out of her hands; but Colonel Julyan was bound to silence, and that may have been why he omitted to call in St. James's Square. For although he could keep a secret as well as another, he disliked more than most others an obligation to suppress truth and suggest falsehood.

Lady Elizabeth Barton, an honest woman in her way, was by no means equally punctilious. That is to say that when she had a right and desirable end in view, and when certain persons appeared to stand in the way of its accomplishment, she did not mind sailing rather near the wind in her remarks concerning such persons. Thus she told her niece in so many words that Colonel Julyan was not a man with whom any decent woman could afford to be seen at Ascot or elsewhere—which was certainly going a great deal too far.

"I thought it was arranged that you were to join our party," she added aggrievedly, "and now I hear that you are going to let him motor you the whole way down from London!"

"Me and Susie Bligh," said Helen. "Most likely he will sit beside the chauffeur and we shall be behind him."

"My dear, who will notice where you sit?—even if you are recognisable through the dust, which will choke

you and make you quite unfit to be seen. What is sure to be noticed and talked about is that you have chosen to go to a race meeting in doubtful company. I don't think you realise, Helen, that London isn't Wiltshire and that you can't do exactly what you like here."

"Oh, I realise that, Aunt Elizabeth," answered Helen imperturbably; "but I never want to do incorrect things, so it doesn't matter. Colonel Julian may be as compromising as you call him; I don't know. But to me he is merely a pleasant acquaintance who has been kind and obliging in many ways, and particularly so in remembering what others seem to forget, that poor Susie likes to have a little amusement sometimes."

Lady Elizabeth, conscious of being one of the oblivious persons referred to, murmured something about being always glad to see Miss Bligh when there was room, but stuck to her point. "Say what you will, Helen, it does do a woman, especially an unmarried woman, harm to be paraded all over the place by Colonel Julian. If nothing worse is suggested, it may give rise to reports that you are engaged to him, and I'm sure you can't wish that to be believed."

"Really, Aunt Elizabeth, I don't think I should care much," answered Helen, laughing. "You can contradict any reports of that kind on my authority, if you think it worth while. Anyhow, I am engaged to Colonel Julian's motor for next Tuesday, and I can't break the engagement."

Lady Elizabeth had to make the best of this intimation that Colonel Julian was not what she had begun to apprehend that he might be. She was far from being satisfied with what her nephew Lavernock incontestably

was; but the best had to be made of him too, and the best that could be done for him must be done. So Mr. Barton had been instructed to bid him to the tea and strawberry gathering on the terrace of the House of Commons at which the above dialogue took place, and, for a wonder, he had accepted the invitation. He had been told that he was to meet Helen, and had doubtless remembered, with relief, that the precincts of the Houses of Parliament lay outside Margery's beat.

However, when Helen arrived, he had not yet put in an appearance amongst her uncle's guests, of whom Forrester was the first to accost her. It had no more occurred to Lady Elizabeth than it had to Julyan or Miss Bligh that Forrester might prove a possible rival to Lavernock; yet he was good-looking enough, attractive enough, eligible enough to rival anybody. Perhaps it was his air of juvenility that seemed to exclude him; for Helen had always consorted with her seniors and professed to prefer their company. In reality her preference for Eustace Forrester's company increased every day. The sight of his healthy, comely, sunburnt face was always a welcome one to her, and now when he asked with some eagerness to be allowed to introduce her to "his people," she gave a very willing assent.

General Forrester, a sexagenarian replica of his son, with a spare upright figure, clear blue eyes and friendly, courteous manners, was glad to meet Miss Monk, and remembered very well—though she, of course, would not—that he had met her once before in her childhood. He had known her uncle, had shot pheasants at Lavernock on more than one occasion and had questions to

ask respecting the neighbourhood and its inhabitants which Helen enjoyed answering. Anybody who would talk to her about her uncle and her old home might count upon impressing her agreeably. Mrs. Forrester was one of those charming, white-haired old ladies who have become all but extinct in a bewigged, massaged, enamelled epoch. Her conversation and ideas were as completely out of date as her aspect. She was undisguisedly proud of her handsome son, made no apology for extolling his virtues and exploits at great length and evidently took it for granted that her hearer must be interested in so engrossing a topic. Very likely she may have had maternal aspirations with regard to her hearer, for no fond mother can object to see her son visibly smitten with a beautiful heiress; but her tone was not at all that of a supplicant, and when she joined her husband in hoping that they might see more of Miss Monk before they left London, it was quite possible to believe her both sincere and disinterested.

Nice, unsophisticated, well-bred people, Helen thought. The sort of people with whom she could feel happy and at home; the sort of people with whom, had the conditions been other than they were, she might gladly have formed closer ties than those of mere acquaintanceship. Amongst the people who formed the bulk of Mr. Barton's party and adjacent parties she never felt quite at home, though she always contrived to look so. Not many of them were well-bred, as she understood that term; very few indeed were unsophisticated; all of them discoursed in strident voices upon a range of subjects almost infantine in its monotonous little ambit. After a time Helen, escaping from

strawberries, tea and inane babble, dropped her elbows upon the parapet overlooking the river and was granted the privilege of her own company. This privilege she obtained by virtue of a certain unapproachable air which she knew how to assume and which exasperated Lady Elizabeth, who always felt that her niece ought to have been a much greater social success than she was. Since, however, Lady Elizabeth, after all, wanted her niece to marry her nephew, Helen's aloofness had its compensating side, and it seemed best to leave her alone until the tardy nephew should see fit to present himself.

This he only did when his advent had been almost despaired of, and, wasting no time upon his other relatives, steered a straight course for the one person whom, as it happened, he desired to see. So Helen, roused by a touch on the elbow from absent-minded contemplation of the turbid Thames, was confronted with a person whom she, for her part, had at that particular moment very little desire to see.

"You look as if you were trying to make up your mind for a plunge," Lavernock remarked, pointing to the river.

Perhaps that was just what she had been doing, although the plunge may not have been of the nature referred to.

"No," she answered; "however difficult life might become for me, I don't think I should ever be tempted to end it in that disgusting way. Imagine the quantity of dirty water that one would have to swallow!"

"The chances are that one wouldn't have much time to criticise the flavour of one's last drink. But then

again there would be more than an even chance of one's being forcibly rescued by some busybody or other. That's why I don't jump off Westminster Bridge myself, and that's why I couldn't recommend the Thames to you if you were really tired of life, as of course you aren't. Why should you be?"

"Is there any reason why you should be?" Helen asked, turning to look at him; for his voice sounded fatigued and dejected.

"Several excellent ones," he replied unsmilingly. "You know what some of them are; but even if you wished to abolish them, you couldn't; so——"

"I do wish to abolish them," she interrupted, "and I believe I could, if you would let me. Your troubles are mostly connected with money, aren't they?"

"Mostly, yes. And you would like to give me money, wouldn't you? And I should like very well to take it. Unluckily, as I had to remind you once before, the only way for a man to possess himself of a spinster's fortune is to marry her."

He stared his neighbour full in the face as he spoke; then averted his eyes and laughed. "You stand fire well," he remarked; "I always say you're the pluckiest woman I ever came across. Now, Helen, may I talk straight to you?"

"I wish you would," she said.

"I know what you don't wish, and I'll clear the ground by telling you that you're safe against its ever happening. I'm not going to ask you again to be my wife, Helen—neither now nor at any future time. So you may dismiss that spectre from your mind once for all. But you would rather not have been enriched at

my expense, and you would be glad to do anything you could for me; isn't that it?"

She made a sign of assent.

"Very well," he continued; "there's something you can do for me, and I shall be no end obliged to you if you will. It's pretty generally believed, as of course you know, that you and I shall end by marrying, and so long as tradespeople and others have got that idea in their heads I shan't be worried much. But once let them find out their mistake and they'll be on me like a pack of hounds. Do you see what I mean? I don't ask an awful lot of you; I only want you just to let the world think what it pleases for a little longer—say until the autumn. If my affairs haven't pulled round by September, I shall be—well, in the river or the family vault or some such quiet place."

Helen made the requested concession at once; the world was very welcome to think what it might please respecting her future. Then, as Margery Vernon's letter recurred to her memory, she opened her lips and seemed to hesitate.

"Well?" asked Lavernock sharply.

For an instant she thought of warning him about the woman's threats; but she foresaw that by doing so she would be far more likely to infuriate him than to render him prudent; so she only said:

"I was wondering whether—Is it necessary, do you think, that we should be often seen together in public?"

He caught her up promptly. "Not a bit! Much better we shouldn't be. You see, the fact is——"

As he did not proceed to tell her what the fact was,

she smiled and answered, "Oh, one sees. I suppose it would be a waste of breath to give you sound advice?"

"It would, thanks. You can't be more convinced than I am of the abstract wisdom of dropping this, that and the other. Cards, for instance, like old Julyan. The idea of old Julyan's dropping cards! It's rather comic. Who persuaded him, I wonder?"

"You might do worse than imitate him."

"Can't afford it until the luck turns, my dear. I should be a lunatic to stop now that I've been losing steadily for months."

"And you will think yourself a lunatic to stop while you are winning," Helen observed.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes; so the game goes merrily on. If I had a son, he should be a teetotaller, he should never back a horse and never touch a card. And there are one or two other things that he shouldn't do, if I knew it. But of course I shouldn't know what he was up to, and the odds are that he would be just as incorrigible as I am. Well, so long, Helen, and thank you."

He strode away, leaving Helen to make what she could of assertions which perplexed her, in spite of their precision. She knew the man too well, had had too long experience of his varying moods and flagrant inconsistencies, to believe altogether in his renunciation of a fortune which might have been his for the asking. Yet he had in the most explicit language accorded her the liberty for which she had longed with an intensity of which she herself had hardly been conscious until now. Could anybody—could even her own highly sensitive conscience—reproach her if she were to take him at his

word? Although she had never liked Lavernock better than she did now, she had never before felt so strongly that it might be impossible for her to marry him. And the figure of Eustace Forrester, detaching itself just then from a knot of ladies and advancing towards her, seemed to her fancy a little like the symbol of that impossibility.

CHAPTER XIII

HELEN HAS A GOOD DAY

To love someone who does not, and never can, love you is, no doubt, to be in a condition which scarcely allows of happiness. Still, melancholy has its gradations, and it is certain that, whether one be sanguine or hopeless when in love, one cannot but be cheered and warmed by incidental kindness on the part of the beloved being. So, as Helen was in a particularly good humour on the opening day of the Ascot week, Colonel Julyan, leaning back from the front seat of his motor to talk to her, enjoyed himself almost as much as he had done in Venice and quite as much as he could expect to do anywhere in this world. Had he known all her reasons for looking so radiant, he might have felt a little less cheerful; but by the merciful decree of Providence we all know remarkably little about one another, and indeed if Julyan thought that Miss Monk was in high spirits because she was young, because it was a fine day, because some timely showers had laid the dust and because she was going to a race meeting for the first time in her life, he was not, after all, so very far wrong.

The transit in Julyan's powerful, smoothly-running car was accomplished with all the more despatch because

a circuitous route was taken, and even Lady Elizabeth, who was the first person to greet Helen after she entered the Royal Enclosure, could not say that her niece presented a travel-stained appearance. What she did make haste to say was :

“Now remember, Helen dear, you and Miss Bligh are lunching with us. I haven’t asked Colonel Julyan, and I tell you plainly that I’m not going to ask him.”

Helen wondered whether her aunt had asked Lavernock. He was not visible in the gaily attired throng which surrounded her, and in truth he was taking good care not to be visible ; for he could guess whose field-glasses were fixed upon him from the Grand Stand while he wandered about restlessly, exchanging a word now and then with his trainer. He had worries enough as it was, without exposing himself to the risk of being publicly rated.

The field-glasses, as it chanced, were just then giving him a rest, although they would assuredly have been brought to bear upon him if he had approached the entrance of the Enclosure. The lady behind the glasses, a lady in a rather violent purple gown and wearing an enormous hat of the same colour, was intently scrutinising Miss Monk, whose black and white costume had probably cost less than half the price of her own, yet who looked exasperatingly distinguished, exasperatingly handsome, and who was admitted as a matter of course into precincts which, if no longer rigidly exclusive, continue to exclude quite a large number of perfectly respectable people. Lady Lavernock claimed to be perfectly respectable and imagined that, as a countess, she had a right to be where Miss Monk was ; but since

it did not happen to be commonly supposed that she was either the one or the other, she had to remain outside, grinding her teeth. Why did she remain outside? Why were her rights and her rank still unrecognised? She might have said, and had often said, that it was because she cared as little for the coronet which she was entitled to use as she did for the society of other coronetted women; but the real and somewhat tragic reason was that she cared passionately for the husband whose life she did her best to render unendurable, and that she could not, therefore, insist upon a course which, according to him, must bring about his instant ruin. This did not deter her from continually menacing him with insistence upon that course; much less did it deter her from being fiercely, miserably jealous of the cousin from whom she had so little to fear. During one of their frequent wrangles, Lavernock had been foolish enough to tell her that he had never really been in love with any woman in the world but Helen, and she had not forgotten that. Lavernock, as she was quite well aware, had loved many women, herself included; also he was habitually untruthful. Yet it might be true, and probably was true, that he had only been "in love" with one. And that one, by a cruel caprice of destiny, could have brought him wealth, in addition to happiness! Helen Monk, to be sure, could give him neither now; but then Helen Monk had not been informed of that circumstance and was not likely to be yet awhile. Thus Lady Lavernock was liable at any moment to witness behaviour which drove the blood to her head, and when the blood rose to her head she felt as if she would like to kill Helen, as if she would like to kill Lavernock, to

kill herself. Some dole of pity may be spared for her by the generous. She was vulgar, shrewish, vindictive, shallow in all her feelings and emotions, with a single exception ; but she was not incapable of self-sacrifice and she had made acquaintance with grim despair. That she should hate the woman whom she regarded as the source of all her wretchedness was perhaps illogical and unjust, but it was hardly surprising.

Helen, unconscious of malign scrutiny, and blissfully conscious of being more nearly her own mistress again than she had been able to feel at any time since her uncle's death, was smiling upon all who approached her and receiving the merited recompense which awaits those who smile upon their fellow mortals. If Miss Monk's admirers had hitherto been a trifle tepid and perfunctory, they became warm on that Ascot Tuesday which was destined to count as her one social triumph, and it was very generally observed that she could be as charming as she was beautiful when she chose to take the trouble. She was taking no trouble ; but she was for once free from the haunting sense of any ; she was vaguely, pleasantly aware of a success which she had not sought ; the huge, brilliant garden-party that Ascot is diverted her, amused her eyes, gave her in some degree that joy in being alive which is so fugitive, so indescribable and, as a rule, so little to be accounted for by the conditions that produce it. She was in a mood to feel as though the whole shifting picture, from the State procession up the course to the swarm of humanity, the booths and fluttering flags beyond it and the distant trees of Windsor Forest, shimmering in a blue, sunny haze, had been designed for her special benefit, and she paid it, in return,

the tribute of an unqualified approval. The first race, too, interested her more than she had expected it to do, and there was nothing to spoil the thrill of excitement with which she watched a close finish; for luckily she did not know that Lavernock was a heavy loser by the defeat of the favourite.

Lavernock had great hopes of pulling off the Prince of Wales's Stakes with one of his own, named Ragged Robin. So Helen was informed by Forrester, who escorted her to the paddock to inspect the horse and who was surprised at the rapidity with which she recognised the good points of an animal not very taking to the unpractised eye.

"You are a judge of thoroughbreds, I see, Miss Monk," he remarked.

"Only of their shape and make," she answered. "I know nothing about the niceties of training; but I should be afraid, from the look of him, that this one was hardly in racing condition."

"Ah, he's a bit deceive there," Forrester observed. "He never flatters the trainer or pleases the public; but he's a game little beggar. I shouldn't be at all surprised to see him win, though I hear they're offering six to one about him. I hope he does win, anyhow, for Lavernock has backed him for all he's worth, I believe."

Lavernock, chancing at this moment to traverse his cousin's field of vision, could not ignore her beckoning finger.

"Oh, yes, I expect so," he said hurriedly, in reply to the question which was at once addressed to him. "With luck, he ought just about to do the trick."

"But you are always telling me how bad your luck

is," observed Helen anxiously. "Will it be a great catastrophe if Ragged Robin doesn't win?"

Lavernock laughed. "Well, it'll be useful to me if he does."

"But if he doesn't?" Helen persisted.

"Oh, I don't know; I don't want to think about that. I say, they're all saddled; hadn't you better be getting back?"

He was obviously anxious to make his escape. His eyes were roving about uneasily and the muscles of his cheeks twitched. Presently he murmured something which did not sound like a benediction and, waving his hand, "Pray for me!" said he, as he darted off.

It crossed Helen's mind that, although he was perhaps past praying for, he might not be past paying for. On her way out of the paddock she had another glimpse of her elusive cousin. An overdressed woman in a preposterous purple hat, who held him by the arm, seemed to be scolding him. He flung her off roughly, and the next moment Helen recognised Margery Vernon, whose black eyes instantly flashed to her a message of such concentrated venom and defiance that it was as if she had received a blow in the face. The incident was trifling and contemptible enough; but it was unpleasant and it caused Helen to turn an inattentive ear to Forrester, who was telling her that Ragged Robin had advanced to short odds at the eleventh hour.

"I wish now I had put a modest fiver on him myself," the young man remarked regretfully; "but one has got into the way of taking it for granted that Lavernock's horses are bound to lose."

He might have added that he and others had got into a way of taking it for granted that the public form of Lavernock's horses was likely to be misleading. Ragged Robin, however, had always run consistently and, though never quite victorious, had on more than one occasion deserved to be. On the present occasion it was beyond question that he was meant to be, and the distance was what he was believed to like; so that when Helen, watching the race with bated breath, saw him draw gradually to the front and pass the leading horse about a couple of furlongs from home, she thought, as everybody else did, that the struggle was over. There arose a shout of "Ragged Robin wins!" and without doubt Ragged Robin would have won if something had not happened—the horse changed his leg, Forrester said—which deprived him of the lead, and though he came on with a gallant rush, he just failed to catch his only dangerous opponent, who passed the judge's box a nose ahead of him.

"Well, there goes ten quid!" sighed Major Spurling, as he dropped his glasses into their case. "Serves me right, I suppose, for flying in the face of the Fates, who mean making an end of poor Lavernock, if they have to upset all the certainties that ever were to do it."

"Serves you right for betting at all!" returned his neighbour. "I should have thought you would have had more sense at your age."

"My dear Susan—I beg your pardon, I mean my dear Miss Bligh—if you had as much sense as I have, you wouldn't be for ever reminding a man of his age. Be very sure that he doesn't forget it, even if he can thank Heaven and his own abstemious habits that he's

just as sound in wind and limb today as he was at twenty."

"Don't lose your temper," said Miss Bligh.

"You won't make me do that. But I've lost my money, and what's worse is that Lord Lavernock has lost his."

"I don't see why it's worse," Miss Bligh remarked.

"That's because you aren't a doctor and he isn't your patient."

"Fortunately for him!"

"Well, yes, you would play the devil with him if he were under your care, I take it. You're an unscrupulous and bloodthirsty woman, Susan. But, as I have told you all along, he isn't the danger you think him. Margery Vernon has got him tied up tight."

"And, as I have told you all along, ties of that sort are snapped the more easily the tighter they are drawn. I look for salvation much more confidently to Colonel Julyan than to Miss Vernon."

"I know you do; and a more fantastic notion never entered your fantastic head. I suppose it isn't altogether impossible, though it certainly doesn't strike me as probable, that Miss Monk might accept Colonel Julyan, but I'll be shot if I see an old bachelor like the Colonel, who might have married almost anybody years ago, and who has all the money he wants—I'll be shot if I see him asking her!"

"Ah, my poor Major Spurling, there are so many things that you can't see! Your own knees, for instance. How many years is it since you took your last fond look at them?"

"There you go, Susan!—overdoing it, as usual, and

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consequently failing, as usual, to get a rise out of me. For a man of my height forty-eight inches round the waist isn't out of the way. It's nonsense to call me fat."

"Come to that," Miss Bligh retorted, "it's nonsense to call me fantastic."

They strolled up the course, wrangling half jocularly, half in earnest, as was their custom whenever they met. They had concluded an alliance, based partly upon quasi-sentimental memories, partly upon a similarity of situation which kept both of them a little apart from the coterie to which they had become affiliated by circumstances and which tended to throw them together. They had further in common a very sincere and disinterested wish to protect certain people who seemed ill qualified to protect themselves.

Helen, who was seldom troubled with misgivings as to her own ability to protect herself, knew only too well how differently her hapless cousin was constituted. She made anxious inquiry as to what the loss of this race was likely to imply for him, but could get little definite information out of Forrester, who indeed was not in a position to furnish her with any.

"All I know," the young man said, "is that Lavernock told us last night he would be stony broke if Ragged Robin didn't win, but I've heard him say that sort of thing heaps of times before, and somehow or other he always seems to pull through. After all, I suppose he can't be so awfully hard up, can he?"

Helen shook her head. "I am afraid he can. He has literally nothing except what the estates bring in, and I daresay very little of that actually reaches his

hands. I suspect that he is only staving off his creditors by means of occasional wins on the turf or at cards."

This was so notoriously the case that Forrester could make no rejoinder. After a pause, he said, with some hesitation :

"Well, if the worst comes to the worst, Lavernock probably knows that you stand between him and bankruptcy."

"Yes," she answered laconically.

"Ah, but not in the way that you mean!" the young man made haste to add. "That would be too—too monstrous!"

Helen smiled. "So you say, but——"

"You know why I say so."

"Yes, and it isn't a very convincing reason, is it?"

"I wonder what Lavernock himself would say about it!"

"He told me the other day that he was not going to ask me again to marry him."

"By Jove!—did he?"

"Yes, but he has said before that no self-respecting man could accept money from a woman unless he married her, and I am not sure that that isn't true. Wouldn't you feel the same yourself?"

Forrester's eyes dropped and he coloured a little beneath his tan. That such would be his feeling was undeniable, and he could only falter out lamely at length, "Well, but—I'm not Lavernock."

Helen had a little laugh at that; but the conclusion which she proceeded to draw was vehemently disputed.

"Not a bit of it!" cried Forrester; "nothing of the

sort follows! What more can a man say than that he isn't going to ask you to marry him? What more can you do than offer to give him money which you think he ought to have? No; I can't admit that you are in any way bound by what you fancy that your uncle would have liked you to do. Who is to say what he would have liked? Besides, he's dead and out of it. I'm alive, and I won't call myself out of it before I'm obliged."

He went on to plead his case with a good deal of simple fervour, and with an ultimate result in excess of his anticipations; for he did at last obtain from Helen an acknowledgment—very quietly and calmly made, but none the less significant on that account—that she wished it were possible for her to regard herself as free. Such an admission was surely tantamount to an avowal! Forrester, who so interpreted it, would have been even more elated had he known that Helen had gone to the extreme limit allowed her by her promise to Lavernock. As it was, he was content to bide his time, and he did not mind being begged to drop the subject.

They had returned to the paddock, as Helen had expressed a wish to see her cousin again; but, failing to discover him there, they had wandered across the course, and it was amidst surroundings somewhat out of harmony with tender avowals that the foregoing colloquy had taken place. Helen had one question to put before quitting the vicinity of the caravans, fortune-telling gipsies and Pierrots which had at least secured them immunity from critical observation.

"Did you have any card-playing at Colonel Julyan's last night?" she asked.

"Weren't allowed the chance," Forrester answered,

laughing. "Lavernock was rather wrathful about it. He wanted to play *écarté*; he has taken it into his head of late that he can, though in point of fact he can't. At least, so they tell me."

"Is Colonel Julian good at *écarté*?"

"One of the very best. I'm a little bit inclined to fancy myself at that game; but the Colonel could beat me five times out of six. It's a funny thing his having dropped play all of a sudden, isn't it? I suppose it sounds rather absurd, but, between ourselves, I shouldn't wonder a bit if his idea was to give Lavernock a lead."

"That is his idea," said Helen, a little ashamed of the doubt which had prompted her inquiry. "I don't know that it's so very absurd. All his life Lavernock has been following somebody's lead—generally, of course, the wrong person's. Anyhow, it is very good of Colonel Julian, and I hope you, for one, will follow suit by refusing to play *écarté* with my cousin."

"You may be quite sure," answered the young man emphatically, "that I shall never as long as I live do anything you would rather I didn't do."

It was a fairly bold assertion; yet she was disposed to believe it. She was disposed to believe in the truth of everything that Eustace Forrester said, disposed to believe firmly in his love and fidelity, more than half disposed to believe that she loved him and that a time might come when she would be free to tell him so. Therefore, as she re-entered the Enclosure, she said to herself that, despite some untoward incidents, the day had, so far, been a good one.

CHAPTER XIV

BY THE RIVER

IF Lady Elizabeth Barton had been willing to render justice to a man whom she did not much like and who had incurred her displeasure by, as she said, "advertising himself" with her niece, she must have acknowledged that Colonel Julyan did not offend in that way at Ascot. But, like everybody else, she was apt to dismiss from her mind annoyances which were not thrust upon her notice; so Julyan received no reward for his self-effacement beyond self-approbation. And even of that he obtained no very full measure. It was such a direct contradiction of his long experience, his precepts and his practice to act as he was doing that he might well ask himself now and then whether he was not simply a gaby, instead of a philosopher. He would most certainly have smiled at the folly of any other man who, loving a woman, deliberately remained in the background and left it to her to call him if she should want him. That, of course, is not the way to conquer a sex which, by some law of Nature or inheritance of primitive tradition, insists upon being conquered, and Julyan should have known, if anybody did, the value of audacity in encounters from which he had so often emerged victorious.

But then he was not trying to achieve a victory over Helen Monk. That was the very thing which he had made up his mind that he would in no case attempt, lest by so doing he should lose a friendship which was more to him than the love of any woman had ever been. He loved her, it was true; but after a fashion to him quite peculiar and without precedent. She was not to know that he loved her, nor was she to suspect him of the least wish to force himself upon her.

By means of such reflections he essayed, with partial success, to convince himself that he was not ridiculous. That he was a little ridiculous may be conceded. Perhaps, if the truth were told, there is only one fashion of loving; perhaps it is not possible to love without some faint vestige of hope, and perhaps it is a mere delusion to suppose that friendship, a sentiment of a totally different order, has anything to say to the subject. However, the opposite view, being agreeable, has been maintained often enough, and if a middle-aged man can get comfort out of delusions, why should they be grudged to him?

Colonel Julyan, for the matter of that, was not so unequivocally middle-aged. If Miss Monk was oblivious of his existence, there was no lack of other ladies who were pleased to make much of him; and if Lady Elizabeth did not desire his presence at luncheon, there were so many other people who did that he had only the embarrassment of choice. His acquaintance was a large one; his reputation of being dangerous to feminine hearts still survived and appealed to the ever insatiable feminine curiosity by which it had been largely won; also he was popular with his own sex, who knew him

for a smart soldier and a good sportsman. So, upon the whole, the day was made as enjoyable for him as circumstances would allow. Naturally, his eyes followed Helen from afar the whole time, and he was unaffectedly glad to notice that she, too, was enjoying herself. He noticed likewise that Forrester was always at her elbow, but saw nothing in that to excite more than a touch of amused compassion for the young fellow. Helen Monk, when she married—a thing she would be in no haste to do—would assuredly not choose a juvenile soldier officer for her husband. Forrester, Julyan thought, was a nice boy, but only a boy, after all. If he himself was too old for Helen, Forrester was undoubtedly too young. She might find him a pleasant companion at a race meeting or a theatre, but her character was on a plane so much wider and higher than his that she could never dream of selecting him as a companion for life. Such errors of judgment and perception are not uncommon amongst those who have left youth behind them. Julyan did not sufficiently take into account that Helen herself was young and that the call of Nature is far more insistent than that of reason; nor did he realise that the very fact of Forrester's malleable simplicity was likely to endear him to one whose instincts were rather to rule than to obey.

Forrester, for his part, would have been much amused at the idea of scenting a possible rival in the person of his former Colonel, to whose care he resigned Miss Monk on the conclusion of the racing, only sighing because he was unable to accompany her to the riverside dinner whither she was bound. As ill luck would have it, he had engaged himself to Lavernock, who had asked a

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few people to dine at Skindle's. It did not seem necessary to mention that Margery Vernon was to be one of them, nor did he know (although he may have suspected) why Lavernock's guests were not to be entertained at the Guards' Club, as had been originally proposed. The truth was that there had been some demur as to Miss Vernon's being received there, which Lavernock, far from resenting, had hastened to construe into a prohibition, his one wish at this time being to keep his wife and his cousin apart. As might have been anticipated, Margery instantly guessed that the Guards' Club had objected to her and swore that she would dine there or die; so Lavernock had had a bad quarter of an hour. But, at Julyan's suggestion, he had invited sundry theatrical stars to whose company exception might fairly be taken even by those who were not over straitlaced, and Margery, on being apprised of this, had acquiesced in the changed venue. For although she liked a gay party, she no longer liked being compromised by her associates in the presence of her husband's friends.

Perhaps Helen felt that she owed Colonel Julyan some amends for having neglected him all day or that he deserved some reward for his unobtrusiveness, or it may be that the sheer exhilaration of the swift run to Maidenhead in the cool of the evening was accountable for an amiability and evident desire to please with which he was not always favoured by her. A sensible man accepts the gifts of the gods without inquiring too closely into causes or motives, and Julyan made bold to believe that he was sensible if he was anything. That he was also by temperament sensitive was a circumstance which he had very adroitly contrived to conceal from his

neighbours all his life long, though personally well aware of it, and that Miss Monk could with the utmost ease make him cheerful or depressed was the inevitable result of her representing what she did for him. When her attention wandered, or when she answered him in monosyllables, he was cast down; when, as now, she smiled at him and seemed to be interested in what he was saying, he was exalted and happy, notwithstanding all his good sense. That, of course, is a very old story. Given a certain condition, the same phenomena will recur while the world lasts; the only advantage enjoyed by the elderly and wise man, in the supposed case, is that he makes the most of the present, instead of spoiling it by anxious speculations about the future. So Julyan had a pleasant run through that well-wooded region of Berkshire which adjoins the valley of the Thames, and he was almost inclined to agree with Miss Bligh, who, when they had arrived at their destination, remarked:

"Well, the only complaint I have to make of that is that it didn't last long enough."

"We have none of us got quite accustomed to the motor revolution yet," Julyan said, "and the consequence is that, after being habitually half an hour late for everything, we now find ourselves turning up just about an hour before our time. There's the river until dinner, though, if you and Miss Monk think you would care for that."

With more prescience than he claimed, he had thought of that, and as they entered the garden of the club, there was Surgeon-Major Spurling, already arrayed in boating flannels and awaiting them.

"Now, Miss Bligh, I'm going to give you a quiet little spin in a tub," Spurling announced.

"You shall," answered that lady, taking in the situation with commendable promptitude. And while she was being assisted to embark, she said :

"David, it is borne in upon me that you are growing intelligent in your old age."

"It is borne in upon me, Susan," returned Spurling, as he pushed off, "that you retain all the innocence of youth. Quite right too ; it's much to your credit. As for me, I'm intelligent enough to guess that when a man makes a particular point of my being here in time to take a couple of ladies out on the river, it isn't a pair-oar that he expects me to have ready for him. Why the Colonel wants to be left alone with Miss Monk I don't pretend to know ; very likely he has something to say to her about Lavernock. But it would take rather more than your romantic conjectures to persuade me that he wants to make love to her."

Whatever Julyan may have wanted to do, he certainly did not intend to make love to the companion who soon afterwards assented to his suggestion that he should punt her a short distance down stream. A punt, indeed, is not a medium very well adapted for that purpose, unless you make for a backwater, stop punting and sit down. This, to be sure, was what Julyan did ; but when he seated himself, with his elbows on his knees, opposite to Helen, who, reclining upon a pile of cushions, was dreamily contemplating the sunset, it was not of love, nor of any subject remotely akin thereto, that they conversed. Nor did they speak of Lavernock, whom they may both have wished to keep

out of mind for once. The sunset, the river, the day's sport—such topics of conversation sufficed one of them as substitutes for the silence which he would have preferred; but the other, not being as satisfied with mere gazing as he, and not having anything quite so satisfying to gaze at, discarded commonplaces as soon as they began to weary her.

"What," she abruptly and irrelevantly asked, "are you going to do with yourself for the rest of your days?"

"I wish I could tell you that I didn't know," he replied, smiling. "Unfortunately, the horoscope of a half-pay officer is easy to cast."

"Oh, but of course you are not that sort of person. Your future couldn't possibly mean a quarter of a century of Cheltenham or Leamington, ending in apoplexy."

"Read London for the provincial watering-place, and that's just what it almost certainly does mean. These little tragedies can't be helped. Nobody wants to be put on the shelf; but everybody's juniors want promotion."

"I can't see why anybody should consent to be shelved in the prime of life. At all events, I can't see why *you* should. Why not go into Parliament?"

"I'm afraid I can't get up any enthusiasm for party politics. It would be something to do, of course; but so is gardening. Occupation for occupation, I'd rather plant cabbages."

"Only gardening isn't enough to fill up all the time."

"I agree that it isn't. Especially when one's garden

is liable to spend a good deal of its time under water. No, my dear Miss Monk, the sad fact is that I haven't a future. A little shooting, with long, empty intervals, a little hunting, a little——"

"Gambling?" she suggested, as he paused.

"You forget that you have robbed me—or rather I should say cured me—of that resource."

Helen straightened herself up and looked vexed for a moment. But presently she resumed:

"Well, if I have, I don't repent. I suppose what you enjoy in gambling is the excitement, and the more you are bored for the want of it the more likely you are to realise that life isn't worth having unless it has some object besides excitement and amusement. You may call that copybook morality; but, after all, the headings of the copybooks wouldn't be where they are if experience hadn't proved that they were perfectly true."

"Quite so; and what lends a touch of pathos to my case is that I have always in my least moral moments recognised the beauty and wisdom of morality. One ought, of course, to be one thing or the other—virtuous or a reprobate. But *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* it's too late to change; one is what one is."

"I don't call that a very apt quotation. Dante wasn't of your opinion."

It was upon the tip of Julian's tongue to remark that Dante had a Beatrice; but he resisted the temptation and only said, "Perhaps it doesn't matter much."

"It matters immensely," Helen declared. "Perhaps

it wouldn't if you had no brains and no heart ; but you know as well as I do that you are not the poor creature you try to make yourself out."

"As well as you do?"

There was a very slight increase of colour in Helen's face ; but she neither dropped her eyes nor withdrew her words. "Yes," she answered unflinchingly. "It's true that I haven't known you very long ; still I do feel that I know you pretty well, and I hate to hear you talk as if your life was over."

She read him a homily, to which he listened with some diversion and with a considerable degree of pleasure, since it showed at least that she was not indifferent as to what became of him. Her observations had no great profundity or novelty ; her purview was that of a benevolent young woman who had always had her own way, who liked to arrange other people's lives for them, who saw bold outlines clearly enough, had scant patience with subtleties and was quite sure that there is a right and a wrong in everything. If she had been a copybook she would have been merely tedious ; but there is an appreciable difference between copybooks and beautiful young women. She had, at any rate, the right to believe that her hearer found her persuasive, and before they landed at the club garden, she had made him promise that he would try to do something better with the rest of his time on earth than to kill it.

Now this, so far as it went, was all very well, and the sense of having become an object of Helen's solicitude could not but be gratifying to one who had until then been more than doubtful of having secured even her

modified liking; but the worst of yielding obedience to the so-called weaker sex is that their appetite grows so rapidly with what it feeds upon. To make a concession to a man is to establish a claim upon forbearance and reciprocity; to do as much for a woman is to render it only too certain that she will be both surprised and angry at any demur to further demands. Thus it was that Julyan went near to losing all the ground he had gained by showing some disposition to recede from an invitation of which he had hoped that he might not be reminded. The open-air dinner gave all the satisfaction that could be desired. In the cool riverside garden, with its lamplit tables and its numerous diners, Helen conversed more gaily and familiarly than was her wont, and more than once thanked her host for giving her such a delightful evening. It was not until coffee had been brought that she made him uncomfortable by asking:

“And now how do we get to your cottage? By road or by water?”

“Oh, my cottage?” said Julyan. “Well, the truth is that my cottage is hardly worthy of your inspection. What I wanted to show you was the garden, which you wouldn’t be able to see at night. I was thinking that if you would do me the honour to come down some afternoon——”

“But it is bright moonlight now,” Helen interrupted.

There was no getting away from the fact that a climbing full moon had already appeared above the tree-tops and was rendering artificial illumination superfluous; so Julyan was fain to resort to other methods of dissuasion. Colours are not distinguishable by moonlight; roses only hold up their heads in the

sun; moreover, the visit would have to be a rather hurried one if the ladies were to catch their train to London.

But Helen, after looking at her watch, declared that there would be plenty of time. Also she could not say, without consulting her engagement-book, when she would have a free afternoon. Finally, as Julyan's reluctance continued to be perceptible, "Why do you want to get rid of us?" she asked.

Spurling, who, while in the act of lighting a cigarette, laid his finger for an instant upon his lips and gave Miss Bligh a gentle warning kick under the table, could have told her. Spurling knew that Margery Vernon was quite as likely as not to insist upon accompanying her entertainer after dinner to the house which was giving him temporary shelter and that she would assuredly do so, should she have reason to believe that Miss Monk might be found therein. But since such information cannot be imparted through the medium of a kick, the puzzled Miss Bligh gave no assistance, while Julyan, recognising the futility of opposition, made the only reply that could be made to Helen's displeased query. The risk, after all, was not so very great. Lavernock's party, it might be taken for granted, would be a late one, and, in the absence of some improbable provocation, Margery's restless jealousy would hardly drive her the length of invading territory which she had never been invited to visit.

Nevertheless, he had as good as promised Lavernock that he would not do what he was going to do, and, since he was a man of his word, the memory of that half-given pledge rendered him uneasy, just spoiling for

him—and, unhappily, for his guest also—the finish of an otherwise successful little venture. Helen, infected by his disquietude and secretly annoyed with herself for having carried a point which it would have been more tactful and more dignified to waive, was polite and appreciative while she was being shown round Colonel Julyan's domain; but her voice and manner had lost their recent friendliness. To be politely appreciative was not difficult; for the cottage turned out to be a long, low, roomy habitation, furnished in perfect taste and beautified by carefully chosen works of art which would have repaid a much more leisurely examination than Miss Monk was able to bestow upon them; while the fragrant garden, bathed in dew and moonlight, had evidently been designed by a skilled horticulturist. But perhaps compliments were not what Colonel Julyan desired. At any rate, he did not appear to be much elated by them.

"Oh, yes, it's pretty enough," he said; "only one is apt to lose interest in one's surroundings when the process of making them pretty has come to an end."

"Well, then it is other people's turn," Helen remarked, "and your house looks as if it would hold a good many other people. Have you a large party with you for Ascot?"

He repressed the smile which rose to his lips at a question which proved that even Miss Monk was not wholly exempt from feminine curiosity. "Only your cousin and Forrester and Spurling," he answered. "And whether they will have the fortitude to spend four consecutive evenings in a house where there are no cards I'm sure I don't know."

She glanced quickly at him, and a sudden wave of contrition overtook her. "It *is* good of you!" she could not help exclaiming.

So they parted upon a note of quasi-reconciliation. She was in a hurry to get away, knowing that he was, for some reason or other, in a hurry to take leave of her.

She would not allow him to accompany her and Miss Bligh to the station, though she accepted Major Spurling's proffered escort. When the trio had departed, Julyan wondered whether it might not, after all, have been better to confess the truth, but decided that he had done more wisely to hold his tongue. Nobody can ever tell how women will take things, and Miss Monk might quite conceivably have refused to run away from Margery Vernon.

Some twenty minutes later he was sure that he had acted wisely; for within that space of time there arose from the landing-steps at the end of his garden a hubbub of human voices, dominated by Margery's, which had in it the shrill, unmistakable ring of battle.

"Here they are, by Jove!" he muttered. "All of them more or less under the influence of liquor, no doubt. Well, they'll draw the covert blank, Heaven be praised!"

CHAPTER XV

STRAINED HOSPITALITY

THE spacious ground-floor room in Julyan's riverside dwelling, which would probably have been a drawing-room if he had had any use for such an apartment, opened by French windows on to a gently sloping lawn. Seated beside one of these, Julyan could see Margery and Lavernock approaching across the grass and could hear the former proclaim at the top of her voice that she meant to find out for herself whether she had been deceived or not, and that nobody on earth should stop her. Nobody was attempting anything so futile. Lavernock, his hands plunged into the pockets of his dinner-jacket, a cigar in his mouth and a straw hat on the back of his head, was not even answering her. Drawing nearer and becoming aware of his host, he removed the cigar to say :

"Sorry, Colonel, but I can't help it. There are a couple of boat-loads of lunatics hanging on to your steps, and, as you see, nothing would satisfy one of them but to land with me. I daresay she won't stay long. In fact, she can't, because she has got to be down at Windsor in time to catch the last train."

Margery came raging across the threshold and swept

the room with gleaming, distrustful eyes. Champagne or her ungovernable temper or both had given her the appearance of an infuriated Maenad.

"I want to know," she called out, planting herself in front of Julyan, who had risen and was bowing urbanely, "whether Miss Monk is in this house or not. I know for a fact that she was dining with you."

"That," answered Julyan, smiling, "is a fact which you and all the world are very welcome to know, Miss Vernon. It may also interest you to hear that Miss Monk and Miss Bligh returned to London after dinner. But if you don't believe me—you look as if you didn't—perhaps you would like to search the premises. Shall I ring and tell the housemaid to take you round? Why you should suppose that I am in the habit of receiving nocturnal visits from ladies, or why you should mind if I were, I can't imagine; but I needn't say how charmed I am to receive one from you."

Margery looked a little foolish. She detested Julyan, whom she always suspected—and not without reason—of laughing at her; but of course she had enough sense to know that Miss Monk was not hidden in a cupboard.

"I'm satisfied, thank you," she answered curtly and sullenly. Then, wheeling round upon Lavernock, "It seems that you spoke the truth, for once. It's your own fault if I can't believe a word you say. The lies that you've told me!"——

"Oh, shut up!—shut up!" exclaimed Lavernock wearily. "You've made a fool of yourself, and you say you're satisfied. So am I, and so, I'm sure, will Colonel Julyan be, if you'll now take yourself off."

"I shall go when I choose," returned Margery defiantly. "And I've more than half a mind," she added, "to take you with me. You'd be a lot safer with me than sitting up all night here and losing your money to people who would know better than to play themselves if they were half drunk, as you are."

Julyan bowed and smiled, in acknowledgment of the flattering allusion; but Lavernock blazed out into sudden passion. His language, when he lost his temper, was not over refined and shall not be reported. It may be admitted that he had had some provocation, and doubtless he would have received more if Forrester had not now made his appearance to stem the incipient flood of mutual invective.

Forrester looked, as indeed he was, thoroughly disgusted. He could not think (for how was he to guess that Lavernock had been actuated by a dog-in-the-mangerish wish to prevent him from dining in Helen's company?) why he had been asked to join a rowdy party of third-rate actors and chorus girls; he had spent a most disagreeable evening and had more than once been upon the brink of falling out with his quarrelsome host. Now, to crown all, he was to be dragged into a fray the undisguised cause of which had roused him to a high pitch of indignation.

"Miss Vernon," said he, as soon as he could make himself heard, "your friends want me to tell you that they would a little rather not have to order a special train from Windsor."

Margery replied that they might sleep at Windsor, or drown themselves on the way down, for anything she cared. There seemed to be no reason, beyond a general

desire to give trouble, for her lingering where she was ; yet Julian, who noticed a slow softening of her eyes, which were fixed upon Lavernock, divined that she might have one.

"As Miss Vernon's friends are in such a hurry," he remarked, "I am afraid there would be no use in inviting them to land ; but perhaps they would consent to accept modified hospitality in the form of claret-cup if it were carried down to them."

"I can't imagine them refusing any sort of drink," growled the ruffled Forrester.

"Come along, then, and help me with the jugs and glasses," said Julian.

He put his arm round his young friend's shoulder and marched him out of the room, murmuring, "The melting mood announces itself. It may lead to a peaceable exit if we absent ourselves."

It led to one of those surface reconciliations between the irreconcilable pair which commonly followed Margery's tempestuous outbreaks. Lavernock was now always willing to make friends with her upon the condition that she went away ; though her expressions of remorse had become almost as distasteful to him as the embraces with which she was but too prone to punctuate them.

"Oh, that's all right—that's all right!" he said impatiently. "There's no great harm done ; only perhaps another time you'll believe that I don't make moonlight assignations with Helen."

"It's past bearing, the way I carry on!" sighed the contrite Margery. "Sometimes I can't help it, that's all. If it was only her being in love with you, I

shouldn't care a snap; but knowing that you love her——"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Lavernock, flinging his arms wide, "how you women will go on harping upon one string! As if everything in this accursed world must needs turn upon love! It would be a good deal nearer the mark to say that every thing turns upon money. If I'm found with my brains blown out to-morrow morning it won't be for love of my cousin, you may take your oath; it'll be because I shan't have won enough before I go to bed to enable me to settle next Monday."

"You *are* going to play tonight, then?" asked Margery quickly.

"I hope so," answered Lavernock, after a momentary hesitation.

"I wish you wouldn't! I have a sort of feeling that you will lose if you do."

"And I have a sort of feeling that I shall win. But really there isn't time to argue. Now stop blowing your nose and come on down to the boat, like a good girl."

At this moment Spurling, back from the station, came in. He whistled under his breath at the sight of Margery, then advanced, with outstretched hand, saying genially:

"Nobody here to give you a welcome, Miss Vernon? That's too bad! I thought the Colonel was at home."

"The Colonel is down at the landing-steps," Lavernock explained. "Miss Vernon and the rest of them are on their way to Windsor by water. They've got to

catch the last up train, and they'll have to look jolly sharp to do it, too."

Spurling, admonished by a wink, pulled out his watch. "By Jove, they will!" he agreed. "Bad manners to hustle you off the premises, Miss Vernon, but the fact is that you're running things a bit fine."

Margery rather liked Spurling, who had the sort of power with her that doctors can generally manage to acquire over hysterical persons. She did as she was told, and scarcely had they stepped out into the garden when they encountered Julian and Forrester, charged with renewed remonstrances from the belated boating party. Margery, while continuing to walk down towards the river, made a slight sign to Colonel Julian and contrived to draw him a few paces aside.

"Colonel Julian," said she, in a low, agitated voice, "do you consider yourself a gentleman?"

"I really do presume so far," he replied.

"Then you won't try to win money tonight from a man in Lavernock's condition."

"My dear Miss Vernon, I haven't the slightest intention of winning his money, whatever his condition may be. I am not going to play cards with him or anybody else tonight."

"Do you promise that, upon your honour as a gentleman?"

"I hardly see why I should; still it happens that I can do so without any inconvenience to myself."

"That's enough," said Margery. "Candidly, I don't think much of you, Colonel Julian, but I don't suppose you'd break your word of honour."

There would not have been time for explanations,

even if she had been disposed to vouchsafe him any. Presently she was bundled into the nearest boat, which she almost succeeded in swamping, and, with much shouting, screaming and laughter, the revellers were despatched down stream. Julyan stood on the bank for a while watching their erratic course along the moonlit river.

"So there goes Lady Lavernock!" he mused. "If one weren't really sorry for the unfortunate fellow, one would await developments with a certain amused curiosity. Odd that she should take me for a rook; but she evidently does."

For what, he wondered, did Helen take him? In all probability for what he was, or perchance for something a little worse. "Well, she did say it was good of me to drop cards."

He resumed, after a space of pensive contemplation, "It isn't good of me; though I'm free to confess that it's amazing of me. Just one resource and excitement left—just one! And then to chuck it away upon the chance of achieving an effect which didn't and couldn't come off! Well, if she takes me for what I am, she takes me for—shall we say an infernal fool? Yes, I think we'll put it at that, rather than a lovelorn dotard."

There is perhaps some small consolation to be derived from calling oneself rude names in soliloquy. The placid river, the roses and the whispering shrubs could not, it was true, contradict Colonel Julyan; but neither did their silence signify assent, as that of hard-hearted mortals might have done, and it is not impossible that his own heart may have made faintly reassuring

rejoinder—not impossible that in the depths of his own heart there may have lurked just a spark of that hope, which, as Pandora discovered, is the very last thing to forsake poor humanity. He lighted a cigarette and wandered about the garden. Lavernock, Forrester and Spurling had gone straight back to the house. He could hear their voices from afar and was not in haste to hear them at close quarters, the lingering echoes of another voice which had once or twice in the course of the day assumed an intonation of great kindness making pleasanter company.

Mindful at length of a host's duties, and debating a little ruefully what was to be done to amuse his guests until bedtime, he made for the house and stepped through the open window, only to find that two of his guests had settled the question of their amusement in a manner extremely unwelcome to him. Lavernock had already seated himself at a card-table which had been dragged out into the middle of the room, and Forrester, looking rather red and angry, was about to do likewise. Even-tempered and easy-going as Julyan was, he had never given his juniors to understand that they might disregard his expressed wishes, and it was with something short of his usual suavity that he said:

"I told you last night, Lavernock, that there was to be no play here and that there are no cards in the house."

"Oh, yes, there are," returned Lavernock coolly; "I took the precaution to buy half a dozen packs this afternoon."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Julyan; "I warned you that I didn't wish it."

Lavernock had been adding claret-cup to champagne, with results that were disagreeably patent. "Oh, all right," he answered; "nobody wants to make you play against your will. Forrester and I are going to have a little flutter at *écarté* before we turn in, that's all. He's such a professor, by his own account, that I should rather like to take a lesson from him."

"I never said I was a professor," struck in Forrester, who had evidently been subjected to previous baiting; "I said, when you asked me, that I thought I could perhaps play as good a game as you do; but I'm not keen on cards tonight, and, as the Colonel doesn't want us to play in his house——"

"Upon my soul, Colonel," exclaimed Lavernock, "this is a little too absurd! You seem to forget that I have lost several hundred pounds to you in this house."

Julyan seemed to remember that he had omitted to pay them, but of course he did not say so. He only rejoined: "All the more reason, my dear fellow, why I should object to your incurring further losses under my roof."

"And how the devil," asked Lavernock, "do you know that I'm going to lose? The plain English of it all is that Helen Monk, for my sake or Forrester's—most likely for Forrester's—has extorted some damned silly pledge from you."

"You are mistaken," answered Julyan coldly; "I am under no pledge to prevent you and Forrester from gambling together. I ask you, as a personal favour, not to do so, that's all."

"Very well, Colonel," said Forrester at once; "we won't."

But Lavernock broke out into a shout of scornful laughter. "Ha, ha, ha!—capital! Bravo, Forrester!"

Forrester went suddenly white. "Where," he inquired, with ominous politeness, "does the joke come in? I shall be much obliged if you will kindly tell me, because I didn't mean to be funny."

"Of course you didn't," returned the other; "that's exactly where the joke does come in. A man who starts to ride at a big fence and then pulls up on the plea that his friends think it would be wrong of him to risk his neck may not be conscious of being funny; but that doesn't, as a rule, prevent spectators from being tickled."

Forrester, without another word, strode to the card-table, from which he had withdrawn a few paces, and sat down.

Julyan watched the pair in silence while the cards were being cut, noted that Forrester acquiesced by a nod in the outrageously high stakes which Lavernock suggested; then lighted another cigarette and moved away to the further end of the room. Presently Spurling, who had gone off to write letters, came in, yawning, to say that he had been on his legs all day and was awfully sleepy. Would the Colonel excuse him if he went to bed? Then, with an interrogative glance at the card-players and lifted eyebrows—

"Hullo! I thought that was barred," he whispered.

Julyan shrugged his shoulders. "I can't stop it. One of them is half tipsy and the other has lost his temper. I've said all I can say. I've hung on to the donkey's tail until, as you see, it has come off in

my hand. So over the precipice he must go, if there's a precipice ahead."

"Which donkey?" asked Spurling.

"The goddess of luck only knows! I should doubt whether either of them had more than a very elementary acquaintance with the game. Don't let me keep you up, Spurling; this may last for hours."

So Spurling retired to bed, and for upwards of an hour Julyan sat patiently awaiting an opportunity for intervention which did not present itself. The gamblers were very quiet, only exchanging such brief questions and replies as the process of the game exacted; the stillness of the summer night was broken every now and then by fitful gusts which set the leaves outside rustling; once, while the cards were being shuffled, Lavernock pushed a slip of paper across the table and said, "That's what I make it"; to which Forrester, with a rather grave and dismayed face, nodded assent. Evidently Lavernock, who had been refreshing himself with whisky and soda at frequent intervals, was the winner, so far. Just as well that he should be, Julyan thought. Forrester could afford to lose a good round sum, and since he must needs let himself be bullied into staking rather more than he could afford to lose, why—~~one~~ might hope that the lesson would not be thrown away upon him. All the same, it was an annoying business, and the end was not yet.

The end seemed to have come shortly after midnight, when Forrester jumped up, saying: "Well, I think we'll chuck it now; the pace is a bit too hot for me."

But he dropped into his chair again on being somewhat discourteously rallied by his adversary.

"Had enough of it already? Why, man, we've only just begun! Never knew such a chicken-hearted chap as you are!"

Julyan, judging by the intermittent remarks and ejaculations which came to his ears during the next half-hour, gathered that Fortune had now turned her wheel, and it was with much relief that he heard Forrester observe: "Well, that makes us pretty nearly quits, and I've got a deuce of a headache. I'm ready to stop, if you are."

But of course Lavernock was not ready to do anything of the kind, nor would he agree to the suggestion of more moderate stakes. It was plain that he meant to go on until he won, and that moderate winnings would not content him. Play was resumed—with results which could be conjectured from his sudden exclamation, as the clock struck one, of——

"Come! I'll tell you what I'll do with you; I'll go you doubles or quits and let that finish it."

Forrester assented without demur, while Julyan, approaching the card-table for the first time, looked on. As he had supposed, neither of the players was an expert; but it seemed possible that Forrester, secure against loss and sick of the whole thing, was not trying very hard to win. Unfortunately, he held, and continued to hold, cards which allowed him no alternative. Soon he took three tricks in succession, and Lavernock, strangely calm and sober, despite his potations, threw his remaining cards down, remarking:

"That's the *vole*. Now for bed! I'll just write you an I. O. U., Forrester."

He sent that not very valuable document skimming over the table to his late opponent, laughed a little as he rose, stretching himself, and asked: "Got such a thing as a pint bottle of fizz handy, Colonel?"

"Of course," answered Julyan.

"Then, if you'll allow me, I'll have one taken up to my room. I ought to write a letter or two before I turn in, for I don't suppose there'll be much time in the morning; so I'll say good-night."

He strolled out of the room, nodding carelessly and making no remark upon the subject of his luck or his losses, while Forrester, who looked rather sheepish, silently exhibited the I. O. U. to their host.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Julyan, aghast, "how did you manage to get to such figures?"

"I'm awfully sorry," the young man said; "but really it wasn't my fault. As a matter of fact I'm feeling beastly seedy, and the last thing I wanted to do this evening was to play cards; but, as you heard, he would take no denial. He can never pay, can he?"

"Never in the world! As for his I. O. U."——

"Oh, hang his I. O. U.!" cried Forrester, tearing the paper into pieces, which he threw into an adjacent waste-paper basket.

"Yes, my dear fellow, but you can't wipe out the debt in quite so simple a manner. Indeed, you can't wipe it out in any conceivable manner, simple or otherwise."

"I needn't claim payment, and I shan't. What was I to do? I didn't want to stake thousands, or hundreds

either. I can't help it if he isn't quite a match for me at *écarté*."

"Oh, you're an adept," said Julyan, smiling. "I ~~watched~~ your play at the end, and I was much impressed. No reasonable person could blame you for winning—scarcely even an unreasonable person. The mischief is that persons may be found unreasonable enough to blame me."

"What persons? I don't see why anybody but ourselves should ever hear a word about the matter. You won't talk, nor shall I. The fact is," Forrester added, after a momentary pause, "that I've a rather particular reason for hoping that nobody will hear of Lavernock's having lost money here tonight."

So had Julyan; but he had very little hope indeed of the secret's being kept. When Forrester had left him, he threw himself down upon a sofa and reflected that if Lavernock's luck was singularly bad, his own was not of the best. True, he had kept both the promises that he had given; but well he knew that he would be held to have violated them in the spirit, if not in the letter. What would happen was easy to foresee. For Lavernock to pay what he owed was out of the question; but he would doubtless feel bound to pay a portion of it on account, and in order to do that, he would have to borrow of somebody. Practically, there was but one person left to whom he could apply, and he was certain to apply to her—was in all probability making written application to her at that very moment. All along it had been certain that Lavernock would end by asking and taking money from his cousin, and, since she was both

willing and anxious to supply his needs, that in itself would be no such great misfortune. But it would be a somewhat serious misfortune if Helen were to learn that her cousin had ruined himself in the house of the man who had ostensibly abjured play for the sole purpose of shielding him from that calamity.

"The infernal irony of it all," mused Julyan, "is that if I had played with the fellow myself, no damage would have been done; because then he would have won just as much or as little as I chose to let him. It must be admitted that my benevolent inspirations are the reverse of happy."

CHAPTER XVI

LAVERNOCK WITHDRAWS

IN our latitudes there is no actual darkness during the month of June. When Julyan, before shutting up the house, stepped out on to the verandah which surrounded it, the moon had disappeared; but in the eastern sky there was already a suggestion of light, soon to become faintly tinged with colour, against which the trees and shrubs of the sleeping garden were clearly outlined. Not a sound, near or distant, broke that profound hush which commonly heralds the dawn; "the innocent brightness of a new-born day" was at hand; and Julyan, not insensible to the peculiar charm of the hour, lingered for a while, letting it sink into his rather fatigued soul.

"*Die Welt wird alt und wird wieder jung,*" he muttered, "*Doch der Mensch hofft immer Verbesserung.*" That's true, and it only shows what an irreclaimable blockhead *der Mensch* is. No second youth for him, whatever the world's experience may be; yet he must needs cling forlornly to hopes which his reason tells him are incapable of fulfilment. Copybook morality, she said. Yes, there's that—the last resort of ignoble minds! And I promised her that I'd have a try. I've

made a promising start, she'll think, when she hears of tonight's doings! What's so truly ludicrous is that I, antique and blameless, should be kept broad awake by fear of what she may say or think, while those two young miscreants are placidly snoring in their beds."

Apparently they were not yet doing that; for, as he re-entered the house and closed the shutters, there came muffled thuds of hurrying footsteps overhead which caused him to pause and listen. "What the deuce are they up to now? At least they haven't begun to quarrel, I hope!"

No further sound struck his apprehensive ear. For a few minutes he busied himself in collecting the scattered cards and tearing up scraps of paper, scrawled over with figures, which were best not left to excite the curiosity of matutinal housemaids. Then, after extinguishing the lamps, he lighted a candle, and was preparing to seek the repose for which he felt so little inclination, when the door was softly opened to admit Forrester, clad in pyjamas and barefooted. The young man's cheeks and lips were chalky white; he was shaking all over; his blue eyes, bewildered and scared, seemed to stare at some horrible, invisible object. For an instant Julian took him for a somnambulist, but perceived at once that he had to deal with a man so paralysed by nervous shock as to have lost all power of articulate speech.

"Well, what is it?" he asked, in a tone of sharp command. "Pull yourself together. What has happened?"

"Lavernock has cut his throat," gasped out Forrester through chattering teeth.

Sudden catastrophes and emergencies affect different people in different ways; it is a question of temperament. Julyan, without a word, pushed his informant aside and made for the door; but Forrester plucked him by the sleeve, exclaiming:

"Don't go upstairs!—it's too ghastly, and you can't be of any use. Spurling and his man are in the room."

"Are you sure he is dead?" asked Julyan.

"Oh, dead—yes! I never saw anything so——"

The young man broke off, sank down into a chair and covered his eyes with his trembling hands.

There were few things in the world that made Julyan more angry than the spectacle of a fellow-creature deprived of self-control; but, as he never lost his own, he uttered no rebuke. He poured out half a glass of brandy and held it to the other's lips, saying, "Here, swallow this and try to be intelligible. You went into his room and found him with his throat cut, I suppose?"

Forrester, after gulping down the brandy, straightened himself in his chair. "I'm sorry to have made such an exhibition of myself," said he, with a sickly smile. "The fact is that I was feeling pretty seedy when I went to bed, and this has clean bowled me over."

He had been startled out of his first sleep, it appeared, by feeling the house shake and by the impression that something heavy had fallen to the ground hard by. He had listened for a moment and, hearing no more, had not moved; but after a time the sound of voices and steps in Lavernock's room had made him uneasy; so he had got up and, going into the adjoining bedroom, had seen——

"Never mind that," interrupted Julyan considerably; "you needn't describe what you saw. Well, Spurling was there, was he?"

Forrester nodded. "But all the doctors in England couldn't have saved him. He had almost cut his head off, Spurling said."

"I see. Now, my dear fellow, I don't wonder at your being upset, and I should advise your going back to bed if I could spare you; but I don't think I can just yet. We must consider what is best to be done. Stay where you are while I go up and speak to Spurling."

At that moment Spurling entered. He also was in pyjamas—which were stained with blood, Julyan noticed—and all the ruddy colour had disappeared from his square face. However, he was quite composed and had all his wits about him.

"This is a bad job, Colonel," he began. "I can't say that I expected anything of the sort, but I can't say that I am exactly surprised either. For some time past his nerves have been in a very queer state."

"Ah!" said Julyan quickly; "you, as his medical adviser, are prepared to state that?"

"I am prepared," answered Spurling, with some hesitation, "to state that his nervous system was out of order and that he was in a condition to be rendered irresponsible for his actions by any—er—sudden calamity or reverse."

"Will it be necessary to allude to calamities or reverses?"

Spurling glanced at Forrester, who had once more buried his face in his hands. "H'm—well, yes; I'm afraid so," he replied.

Forrester sprang abruptly to his feet. "I say!—you don't think he killed himself because of—of anything that occurred this evening, do you?"

"Oh, when a man is threatened with a suicidal mania, there's no telling how much or how little will turn the scale," was Spurling's evasive reply.

"Just so," struck in Julian, "and I believe it is a fact that Lavernock had had rather heavy losses at Ascot. Now there's one point as to which we must make up our minds at once. I am sure you will agree with me that if the circumstance of card-playing having taken place here tonight—a circumstance only known to ourselves, remember—can be suppressed, it would be most desirable, for everybody's sake, to suppress it."

Spurling quite agreed. "Only I don't see," he added, "how it can be suppressed. I found two letters on poor Lavernock's table. Here is one of them."

He handed an envelope to Julian, who examined the address and drew down the corners of his mouth, remarking, "'Miss Vernon'—yes; this will have to be delivered, and of course one doesn't know what its contents may be."

"Unfortunately," observed Spurling, "I do know what are the contents of the other, which was addressed to myself. Shall I read it to you?"

"If you please."

So Spurling produced a sheet of note-paper, from which he read aloud as follows:

"Dear Spurling—I wish I could bequeath you a legacy, for you are one of the very few decent chaps I have come across in this pigstye of a world, which I shall have quitted by the time that you read these lines ;

but I have only debts to leave behind me. I might have held on a bit longer perhaps if I had won something tonight, instead of losing a huge sum; but very likely I should have ended, anyhow, as I am going to end. At best, my future wouldn't have been much of a treat. My cousin Helen, as you probably know, succeeds to the estates. You might tell her from me that I am sorry to be obliged to ask her to defray a certain debt of honour, incurred this evening. Good-bye, old man. Thanks for all your excellent advice, medical and other. It's no fault of yours that I haven't benefited by it."

"That," observed Spurling, in conclusion, "is his last message. I wish it hadn't been written."

"So do I," said Julyan meditatively.

"So do I!" sighed Forrester. "Spurling—can't this document be kept dark?"

Spurling shook his head. "Impossible! There will be an inquest, at which I shall have to appear, and I can't, of course, conceal the existence of such a piece of evidence."

"I should have thought you might," pleaded Forrester. "Who will be the better off for hearing that poor Lavernock's death was hastened by his having insisted upon playing for absurd stakes, against our wish?"

"Oh, it's evident now," said Julyan, "that the only course open to us is to tell the whole truth. Neither Spurling nor anybody else can be expected to commit perjury, and one of the first questions that will be asked will be whether Lavernock left any written statement."

Forrester, with a despairing groan, let himself drop

into his chair again, while Spurling, after scrutinising him curiously for a moment, took hold of his wrist.

"Hullo! hullo!" the doctor ejaculated presently, "this won't do! Do you know that you're in a high fever?"

"Fever be hanged!" returned the young man, snatching his hand away pettishly; "we've something of more consequence than my health to consult about."

But Julyan observed that there did not seem to be any further room for consultation. "I suppose," he added, "the police or somebody ought to be informed at the earliest possible moment."

Spurling nodded assent. "Yes; I'll see to that. Meanwhile, I'll just go and give a few necessary instructions to the valet, who hasn't lost his presence of mind, thank goodness! Forrester, the sooner you get back to bed the better. I'll come and have a look at you as soon as I can."

"Capable man Spurling," remarked Julyan, after the door had closed behind the Surgeon-Major; "it's a good thing that he happened to be in the house."

"Is it?" Forrester returned despondently. "I'm not so sure."

"Yes, my dear boy," repeated Julyan; "it's a good thing; because, if you and I had been left to ourselves, we should have agreed to hold our tongues—and then we should have been found out. Lies, somehow or other, are always a mistake. Besides being a little beneath one's dignity, such as one's dignity is. Of course I know what you are thinking about. Well, if you are in for a bad quarter of an hour with Miss Monk, so am I."

"Ah, but what does that matter to you!"

"Does it matter so very much to you?"

"Nothing on earth," Forrester declared, "could matter half as much! It's easy to foresee how she'll take it. She practically consented on the course at Ascot; but she almost made it a condition—she'll say she did, at all events—that I wasn't to play cards any more with Lavernock. And now the first thing she'll hear will be that he has committed suicide because I have ruined him!"

"What," inquired Julyan, "do you mean when you say that she practically consented?"

"Oh, well, in plain words, that she practically consented to be my wife. I daresay that doesn't astonish you much."

It astonished Julyan beyond all measure and hurt him beyond all reason; but the sharpest observer would not have discovered that it did either.

"Perhaps," said he quietly, "she need not be made aware of your having played with Lavernock at all. Your name, I noticed, was not mentioned in his letter to Spurling."

"It will be mentioned at the inquest, though."

"Not necessarily. Spurling left us immediately after you sat down to play; all he knows is that Lavernock rose up a loser. I shall probably be called as a witness before you are, and if I choose to assert that I took your place and won a sum which need not be specified, since that I.O.U. has been destroyed, there won't be very much left for you to say."

A light of joy and relief sprang into Forrester's eyes, but faded immediately.

"It's awfully good of you, Colonel," he answered,

"and I'm as grateful to you as if I could take advantage of your offer; but it stands to reason that I can't allow you to suffer for my misdeeds."

"It isn't a question of misdeeds," Julyan returned; "it's a question of evils, and I propose to choose the lesser. There seems to be some real danger of your happiness and Miss Monk's being spoilt; there isn't, as you very justly point out, much danger of my being caused acute suffering if she likes to hold me answerable for a disaster which neither you nor I brought about. Let us be thankful that such a simple solution of the difficulty lies open to us."

Forrester hesitated. "But Colonel, you said just now that lies were always a mistake, and you said no man could be expected to commit perjury."

"I believe I did. Well, frankly, I abominate lies, and I shall not enjoy taking my oath to one; still, if it suits me to be inconsistent, that's my affair. As for you, I quite hope that there will be no occasion for you to perjure yourself."

Before Forrester could make any rejoinder, Spurling reappeared. He said:

"I've put everything as far as possible in order. The best plan, I think, will be for me to take an early train up to London. Will you telegraph to Miss Monk, or would you like me to go to her house and break the news to her?"

"You will do us all a service," answered Julyan, after a moment of consideration, "by seeing her and telling her the facts."

"The whole of the facts?" Spurling asked.

"Yes; seeing that they must eventually come to

her knowledge. Say what you can on my behalf. You may truthfully declare that I didn't want to win the poor fellow's money."

At this Spurling stared. "You, Colonel? But I thought it was Forrester who had won his money."

"You must have seen before you went to bed," answered Julian, smiling, "that Forrester was losing and likely to go on losing. Forrester, saving his presence, is not a master of the game of écarté. I, who happen to be fairly well acquainted with it, thought it prudent to replace him at a given moment. I acted for the best, but I succeeded a little too well. There was no stopping Lavernock after things turned against him, and the cards fell in such a way that there was no possibility of letting him win."

"Why am I to say this, Colonel?" inquired Spurling, with incredulity legibly written upon his features.

"Why?" retorted Julian rather tartly. "Why, because it's the truth, of course. Didn't I tell you a short time ago that we're bound to confess the truth?"

Spurling turned to Forrester; but the young man, who had dropped his head upon his hands again, did not seem to be listening, and, when shaken by the shoulder, only looked up and frowned in a dazed, stupefied way.

"Oh, you're in for another bout of influenza; that's what's the matter with you," was Spurling's pronouncement. "You've got to go to bed and stay there till I let you get up; so come along."

Forrester offered no resistance. He was taken by the arm and conducted upstairs, while Julian, left alone, muttered:

“That disposes of the only weak spot in the scheme. There would have been no depending upon him as a witness; but he had influenza pretty badly once before, I remember, and it’s long odds against his being in a condition to give evidence at the inquest. What can she see in him?—good Lord! what can she see in him? Not that it signifies. If it hadn’t been Forrester, it would have been somebody else. In the meantime, my own little future, about which she was pleased to be solieitous, seems to be quite clearly and agreeably indicated. For the rest of my days she will set me down as a traitor and perhaps a sharper, while I shall know that I am a perjurer. Talk about copybook morality! It strikes me this is getting rather ahead of the headings. Or is the whole thing indefensible, I wonder? Well, I never set up to be a moralist. All I hope and trust is that I may never sink to the final humiliation of doubting whether it was worth while!”

CHAPTER XVII

SPURLING AS A BUTTRESS

WHEN Helen, refreshed by a good night's rest, recalled the episodes of the previous pleasant day, she had to acknowledge, with penitence, that she had wound up by behaving rather badly to her kind entertainer. His anxiety to speed his parting guests, which had seemed so unaccountable at the time, was easily enough accounted for, now that she came to reflect upon it. Lavernock might have been expected to make his appearance at any moment, and Lavernock's company after dinner was not always a thing to be desired. If she had not been a little dense, she might have guessed that Colonel Julyan had been actuated by no other motive than consideration for her comfort. Such, in truth, had been his one very evident motive throughout their relations, and if there had been occasions when this had irritated her, there need not be any recurrence of them, since somebody else, who never irritated her, had acquired an importance in her life which naturally disposed her towards an amiable estimate of the world at large.

So she was not irritated by Miss Bligh's prolonged panegyric upon Colonel Julyan at the breakfast table,

and did not even dispute that injudicious lady's assertion of, "He deserves his reward, and what's more, Helen, I believe he'll get it in the end."

"I hope so," she tranquilly replied, thinking to herself that if he would but keep his word, do as she had advised him and devote his remaining years to some useful, practical purpose, he would at least obtain the reward of her approbation, by which he seemed to set store.

Miss Bligh, a trifle disconcerted by this unlooked-for acquiescence, was resuming, "I doubt whether you hope at present for what I do, my dear, but I've no doubt at all as to which way your future happiness lies," when she was informed that Major Spurling, who was in the library, wanted to speak to her rather particularly.

"Then he won't get what he wants until I have finished my breakfast," said she. "Let him wait."

And having despatched this rather uncivil message, she remarked, "David Spurling is a worthy sort of man, and I found him quite useful yesterday; but I'm not sure that he isn't becoming a little too familiar. The idea of turning up at this hour in the morning! I shall have to give him a few instructions for his future guidance."

About ten minutes later she was submissively beseeching him to do as much for her. She was a soft-hearted woman, and the terrible news which her visitor imparted to her with military brevity and medical lack of emotion grieved her all the more because she had a remorseful recollection of having more than once given utterance to the wish that death would remove Lavernock from

Helen's path. So by bursting into tears she brought upon herself the sharp rebuke that she received.

"I asked to see you, Miss Bligh," said Spurling sternly, "because I thought I might depend upon you to behave sensibly and give me some help in a deuced unpleasant task; but if all you can do is to howl, of course there's no use in consulting you."

"One moment!" pleaded Miss Bligh. "I'm going to be sensible presently; but—oh, poor Newbridge! He wasn't a bad sort of boy in some ways, and I remember that I used to think his father was too harsh with him. I don't know that I haven't judged him a little too harshly myself of late; but that was because of Helen. In spite of everything, she has always been really fond of him, and how we are to tell her of this I can't think!"

"Well," said Spurling, "that's what we've got to think about. My idea was that you would probably understand how to do it better than I should."

"I don't!" Miss Bligh disconsolately owned. "How much would it be wise to let her know, I wonder?"

"If you ask me, I think it would be a mistake to conceal or tone down any part of the truth. And the truth isn't pretty. Perhaps you didn't fully take in the meaning of what I said to you just now—that in a letter to me, which will have to be made public, poor Lavernock ascribes his suicide to his having lost enormously at cards in Colonel Julyan's house last night. And it seems that the Colonel was the winner."

Miss Bligh sat up and dried her eyes. "Oh, I'm not going to tell Helen that!" she answered decisively.

"To begin with, I don't believe it. Helen, as I happen to know, had Colonel Julyan's solemn promise that he would never play cards with her cousin again."

"Is that so?" asked Spurling, wrinkling up his forehead. "I half suspected as much. Well, it complicates matters, but it doesn't alter them. What appears to have happened is this: Lavernock began by goading Forrester, who was seedy and didn't want to play at all, into sitting down to *écarté* with him. Then the Colonel seeing that Forrester was losing and wasn't fit to play, good-naturedly offered to take his place; and then, I suppose, the best player won, or else the luck went all one way. Really, under the circumstances, I can't see that the Colonel was to blame."

"Helen will blame him," Miss Bligh gloomily predicted. "That is, she would if I told her your story. Does Captain Forrester confirm it?"

"Yes, I understood him to do so; but Forrester is down with influenza, and he is quite light-headed now, if he wasn't last night. Oh, I'm afraid the story is accurate enough."

Miss Bligh was vehemently certain that it was not. She asked to see Lavernock's letter and at once pointed out that Colonel Julyan was not alluded to in it.

"Two things," she declared, "are as clear as daylight to me. Colonel Julyan can't have broken his word; and, even if he had, he would have taken very good care not to win his guest's money. Depend upon it, he is accusing himself in order to screen Captain Forrester, who probably did win a lot of money and who would naturally be dismayed at the horrible result of his having won."

But Miss Bligh's correct intuition availed nothing against the sober common sense of Surgeon-Major Spurling, who, notwithstanding a sincere affection and admiration for his former chief, could not credit Colonel Julyan with being the man to act after the absurdly quixotic fashion attributed to him.

"My dear Susan," said he, smiling and shaking his head, "such things aren't done. Nobody does them. I don't know whether you realise that this is going to be beastly disagreeable for the poor Colonel. It isn't only that Miss Monk may be angry with him—perhaps he won't mind that as much as you think—but that all his friends will look askance at him. It doesn't sound nice—a young man cutting his throat under your roof because you have won more from him than he can pay. Now I don't mind confessing that just at the first moment it did cross my mind that the Colonel might be deceiving me, because I had taken it for granted that Forrester was the culprit, if anybody could be called a culprit; but when I came to think it over, I saw that that theory wouldn't hold water. No; all there is to be said about it is that it's a thousand pities."

"That," returned Miss Bligh, "isn't all that I intend to say about it. It won't do to hide anything from Helen; I see now that you are right there, and she shall hear every word I have heard from you. Only I shall give her my opinion of the whole business."

"By all means do, and if she shares it, so much the better. I'll wait here, in case she should wish to speak to me; but be as quick as you can, please, for I'm wanted at Maidenhead."

Miss Bligh nodded and moved towards the door; but

with her hand on the lock she halted and turned round, exhibiting a piteously forlorn countenance.

"David," she faltered, "I'm frightened! Helen was very fond of Lavernock, and—and you know what I have always hoped for about her and Colonel Julian. I feel as if I were going to murder somebody!"

"Come, come!" said Spurling, following her and patting her on the shoulder, "it isn't so bad as all that, and I know you're no coward, Susan. I'd go up with you, only I fancy that both you and Miss Monk would rather I didn't. By the way, there's one thing you might do, if you can manage it. The Colonel, I'm sure, would be cheered up by a word from her—just an intimation that she understands and that she believes he acted for the best. See what I mean?"

Nothing would have given Miss Bligh greater pleasure than to coax or extort such a message from Helen; but nothing was less probable than that she would succeed in doing so. She was absent nearly half an hour, and when she returned, her dejected mien told its own tale.

"Oh, yes, of course she was dreadfully upset and distressed," the baffled emissary reported, "but it wouldn't have been Helen if she hadn't judged the whole affair long before I could suggest my reading of it to her, and when once Helen has made up her mind about anything or anybody!"—

"She said some severe things of the Colonel, eh?" asked Spurling

"She did much worse than that; she said nothing at all about him, and wouldn't make any answer to what I said. I shouldn't have kept you waiting more than five minutes if I hadn't been charging against a stone wall

time after time without the slightest effect. I'm sorry, David, but the only advice I can give Colonel Julyan is to have patience, and the only comfort I can give myself is that sooner or later the truth always comes out."

"I'm not sure that it always does, Susan," observed Spurling; "but in this particular instance I'm afraid it has. Well, I must be off. Shall I look you up again when I can?"

"I wish you would!" Miss Bligh answered, with some eagerness. "You're a sort of a buttress, and I foresee that I shall need buttressing. Helen needs it so little in one sense and so much in another that I shall crumble into a shapeless ruin unless I can at least talk her over with somebody. And for the moment there seems to be nobody but you."

Nobody, at any rate, could have proved himself more generally helpful than the indefatigable Spurling, who had been on the go since daybreak and who had still various matters to attend to before he could return to Maidenhead. The first and second editions of the evening papers were out by the time that he reached Paddington, and all made insistent appeal to purchasers by announcing in big capitals "TRAGIC DEATH OF THE EARL OF LAVERNOCK. RUMOURED SEQUEL TO TURF DISASTERS." Mention of other disasters in connection with the melancholy event there was none as yet; but of course there would be soon. Why, when a man has resolved to put an end to himself, should he become oblivious of immediate consequences to survivors? Lavernock, not a bad-natured fellow, not much more selfish than the rest of the world, might so easily have avoided referring in his last written statement to an

incident which was bound to damage his host's character—might so easily have omitted to make any last statement at all! However, it is vain to deplore what cannot be undone, and Spurling, briskly turning his attention to what could be done, like the practical man of action that he was, lost no time in reporting himself to Colonel Julyan, whose clouded brow lightened a little at the sight of him.

"I don't think I've forgotten anything," he said. "I left that letter at Margery Vernon's door. Better not to interview her, I thought. Then I went to St. James's Square and saw Miss Bligh, who broke the news to Miss Monk. Then I looked up the lawyers and made a few more necessary arrangements. How is Forrester?"

"Rather bad, I am afraid," answered Julyan. "He has been delirious ever since you left, and he seems to be in a good deal of pain."

"That will pass. He'll be much better in a day or two, and I've got a nurse coming down to take care of him. It won't be possible to move him yet awhile, though. All this is awfully rough upon you, Colonel."

"A case of influenza in the house is no very serious misfortune," Julyan remarked. "As for other misfortunes, I suppose it must be said that I have brought them upon myself. I suppose that is what Miss Monk did say?"

"Well, I didn't see her."

"But she knows all the circumstances, doesn't she?"

"Yes, I told everything to Miss Bligh, who went upstairs and made her report while I waited, upon the chance of Miss Monk's wishing to see me. However, it seemed that she had no questions to ask; so I left."

"If she said anything very condemnatory of me, I would just as soon hear it, you know," Julyan observed, after a pause.

"I'm sure you would, Colonel. You and I know that what women say when they're hurt or angry is of precious little consequence. But, as a matter of fact, Miss Monk appears to have taken the news very quietly and pluckily, and, according to Miss Bligh, she said nothing at all about you."

Julyan made no further inquiries. He perfectly realised that Helen could never forgive him, and if it was indeed the case that she had not even deemed him worthy of mention, her silence was more significant than vituperation. Of the latter he would assuredly get his share ere long from other quarters ; but he tried to think that he did not care about that. The endeavour was not very successful. In order to be really indifferent to public opinion one must have some definite scheme of life which is not liable to disturbance thereby, and Julyan was very far from being thus protected against the chill breath of disrepute. His tastes, his pursuits, his whole manner of existence were bound up with those of a certain class from which ostracism—should that ensue—would mean nothing short of living death to him. All his bygone sins had come under the category of those which are socially condoned (when they are not tacitly admired), and although Lady Elizabeth Barton and her like might shake their heads over him, nobody had ever doubted, or had the smallest excuse for doubting, that he was absolutely a gentleman in the conventional acceptance of the term. He passed, it was true, for a cynic, and at odd moments would fain have

believed himself one ; but in reality he was something of a sentimentalist, something of a dreamer, and so constitutionally averse to incurring odium that his duties as a commanding officer had often been discharged with a reluctance little suspected by his subordinates. They had at least been attached to him and had trusted him, those subordinates of his ; he might summon a goodly number of them as witnesses to character, if there would be any use in doing so. But of course there would be none ; nor indeed would the occasion arise. Some sequence of ideas led him to remark presently :

" You say you didn't see Margery Vernon. She will have to be present at the inquest, though, won't she ? "

" Oh, yes, I thought of that," answered Spurling, who seemed to have thought of everything. " I wrote her a line and left it with Lavernock's letter. The existence of the letter, you see, makes it indispensable that she should be called ; otherwise one would rather not have advertised the *liaison*."

Julyan considered for a moment. " I take it," said he, " that there is no longer any reason why I should not tell you what we may safely assume that she *will* advertise. Lavernock married her a year ago or more."

Spurling pursed up his lips. " The deuce he did ! And she has kept it dark all this time ! With what object, one would like to know ? "

" That's more than I can explain. Perhaps, in her volcanic, tigerish way, she loved the man and shrank from defeating his object, which was to hold his creditors at bay as long as he could by leading them to believe that he would marry his cousin. A better plan would have been to enlighten his cousin and let her pay his

debts for him ; but he wouldn't hear of that. And of course I was bound to secrecy."

Spurling gazed curiously at the speaker. He was well aware that Julyan had more than once acted the part of a true friend to Lavernock ; he remembered what Miss Bligh had said about that promise which had been given to Helen, and it came into his mind that Julyan was just about the most unlikely person in the world to break such a promise.

"The more I think of it, Colonel," he exclaimed involuntarily, "the more incomprehensible it is to me that you should have offered to play with Lavernock last night !"

Julyan returned his gaze steadily. "After my having said that I wouldn't have any card-playing in the house, do you mean ? Well, yes ; it was a mistake, no doubt, and from one point of view it has been a fatal mistake. Still, there's no telling. Poor Lavernock's situation was so full of tragic elements that I may have done him a service by hastening his release from it, and Miss Monk's situation, at any rate, is simplified now. Thus, you perceive, somebody benefits. By a happy system of poise and counterpoise which almost makes one believe in Providence, somebody generally does benefit, happen what may. So we needn't cry about it."

The honest Spurling, remarking that he must go and have a look at his patient, left the room, a little shocked. Stoicism and insensibility are all very well ; but he could not help thinking that the Colonel's parade of such defensive armour sometimes transgressed the boundaries of good taste.

CHAPTER XVIII

MARGERY'S REVENGE

ON the Ascot Cup day of that year race-goers were provided with a theme for discussion so engrossing that it almost caused them to forget the combined attractions of sport, costume and mutual rivalry which had brought them together in such large numbers. The suicide of one who had borne an honoured name, who had had several horses engaged at that meeting and who was said to have incurred disaster on the turf would, in any event, have been a sufficiently thrilling episode; but the newspapers hinted at further sensational disclosures, while one of them went the length of announcing in so many words that "we have reason to believe that the key to this lamentable tragedy will be supplied at the inquiry which is to be held to-day, when one of our most popular and fascinating actresses will have a tale to unfold respecting which we are at present only at liberty to say that it can scarcely fail to win, both for her and for the unhappy young nobleman who is no more, feelings of deep sympathy, not unmingled with righteous indignation."

Julyan read the above indiscreet statement and tossed the paper over to Spurling, remarking, with a

smile, "So the reporters have got hold of Margery already! Or do you think it was Margery who got hold of a reporter?"

Spurling pulled a wry face. "Oh, most likely she rang them up. I warned her in my note to keep her mouth shut; but I knew she wouldn't. After all, it doesn't matter much, since everything will have to be made public presently."

Everything except the truth, Julyan thought. His wish was that the fact of Forrester's having sat down to play with Lavernock at all should not come out; but he had to be careful. Such a suggestion, addressed to Spurling, would be too risky, and all he ventured to say was:

"I hope they won't insist upon having Forrester's evidence. Of course it will be impossible for him to appear; so perhaps the less mention you and I make of him in connection with the affair the better."

"Well—yes," Spurling agreed a little doubtfully. "As a matter of fact, I'm afraid they may want to hear him, and I must answer any questions that I'm asked; but I'll do what I can. We must try to avoid an adjournment, if possible."

More and more clearly did Julyan realise that that was the one thing which would have to be avoided. Now that he was upon the eve of making a false statement on oath, the difficulties and dangers which inhere in all false statements grew increasingly apparent to him, and he did not like to think of what Forrester, remorseful, compunctious and enfeebled by illness, might reveal under examination. For the rest, he had now no dread of anything else, and he was glad to find

that he had complete command of his nerve and his wits.

Owing to the difficulty of accommodating a swarm of reporters, police authorities, witnesses and others in Colonel Julyan's cottage, it had been arranged that the inquest should be held in a neighbouring public hall, and there, after the jury had gone through the customary formality of viewing the body, the proceedings were opened by the Coroner, a stout, pompous personage whom Julyan mentally classified at once as "a solemn ass." Quite the best thing for him to be, no doubt. Even now his portly form seemed to be heaving in anticipation with the "righteous indignation" predicted by the morning journal, and if anybody should smell a rat, it would hardly be he. .

The first witness to be called was Lavernock's valet, who deposed to having left his late master's room shortly after one o'clock on the morning of the previous day. He had then just been told to open a pint bottle of champagne and to go to bed. It might have been about half an hour later that he had returned, remembering that his lordship had given no orders as to the time at which he wished to be called, and he had been upon the point of knocking at the door when he had heard a heavy fall inside the room. He had at once turned the handle and had been horrified to see his lordship lying on the ground, with his throat cut from ear to ear. He had immediately rushed off to summon Surgeon-Major Spurling, who was asleep, but who jumped up and without a moment's loss of time accompanied him to his lordship's room. Nothing, however, could be done; death, he understood, must have been

instantaneous. He had not noticed anything out of the ordinary in the deceased's manner the last time that he had seen him alive and was not aware of any occurrence which could have prompted him to take his own life. He might have heard rumours since, but he gave no heed to gossip. No, he should not say that his Lordship had been a man of intemperate habits—not to call intemperate. Many noblemen and gentlemen took rather more than was good for them at times.

The next witness was Surgeon-Major Spurling, who, at the coroner's request, followed up some medical testimony by reading the letter, addressed to himself, which he had found on Lavernock's table. Spurling's evidence was given in a lucid, straightforward manner and was of course listened to with deep attention. It was perhaps a pity that in the course of it he manifested an obvious anxiety to exculpate Colonel Julyan and laid rather too much stress upon his host's reiterated determination to have no gambling in the house. He admitted that, having retired to bed early, he had not himself witnessed the high play which was alleged to have taken place; but he could state as a fact within his knowledge that it was Lord Lavernock who had insisted upon playing, in the face of the Colonel's objections. Speaking as the dead man's medical attendant, he was obliged to say that his patient had been addicted to drink. It was, in fact, chiefly as the result of habitual over-indulgence in alcohol that Lord Lavernock's nervous system had become completely shattered. A man in his state of health would be liable to fits of extreme depression, and there would always be some danger of his destroying himself while under the

influence of them. It would not be at all incorrect to describe such accesses of despondency as temporary derangement. He could not tell whether or not the losses alluded to in the letter which he had read had been the direct cause of what had followed; the letter seemed to imply the existence of others. They might have been a contributory cause, no doubt. Well, the last straw, if anybody thought that expression applicable.

Further evidence confirmatory of the valet's testimony having been given, the Coroner observed that at this stage it would have been desirable to call Captain Forrester of the Fusilier Guards, who had spent the evening with Colonel Julyan and the deceased, and who had been present in the latter's bedroom shortly after the tragic occurrence had taken place. He understood, however, that that young officer was seriously ill in bed. Surgeon-Major Spurling, who was attending him, had handed in a certificate to the effect that he was physically and mentally incapable, for the time being, of replying to questions. Under these circumstances, the next person to give evidence would be Colonel Julyan.

In supplying that full description of Colonel Julyan's appearance and demeanour which they knew that their readers would expect of them, the newspaper reporters agreed that he was as calm and collected as if the recent catastrophe had had no personal interest for him. One of them thought himself warranted in using the adjective "callous"; others were content to remark upon the cool detachment, "whether genuine or assumed," of the tone which he was pleased to take up; all received the impression of an uncommunicative and somewhat ungracious witness. The fact was that he had to walk

warily and guard himself against possible subsequent contradiction by Forrester. His best plan, he thought, was to volunteer no information, to return curt, direct replies and to convey to both Coroner and jury the idea that he did not care two straws what opinion they might be forming of him. It was quite true, he said, that he had expressed a strong objection to any card-playing taking place in his house. Yes ; he had allowed his objection to be overruled. Why ?—well, because it had seemed to him best, upon the whole, to defer to the wishes of his guest. No ; it had not occurred to him that such compliance might entail the most terrible consequences for his guest. Certainly the stakes had been high ; they had not, however, been of his naming. Yes ; he would call it distinctly imprudent on the part of a man in Lord Lavernock's pecuniary straits to play for such stakes. He could not state the amount of the "huge sum" spoken of in the letter to Major Spurling. No ; not even approximately. He had not kept any memorandum of it. Nor did he hold any acknowledgment of it as a debt due to him. Perhaps that was extraordinary ; but it happened to be the case. He had known the deceased intimately for a considerable number of years, during the greater part of which he had been his commanding officer. Possibly he had possessed a certain degree of influence over him. Not sufficient to prevent him from ruining himself. On the last night of his life Lord Lavernock might have been drinking, but had not been intoxicated. Naturally, if he had had any foreboding of what his guest contemplated, he would have taken precautionary measures. He had had no such foreboding.

Upon the above and other replies of a similar character the Coroner had visible difficulty in abstaining from adverse comment. He frowned, blew out his cheeks, drummed upon the table with blunt fingers and was evidently growing more and more angry with the supercilious Colonel, who, though not overtly discourteous, spoke to him as to an inferior and rather unintelligent being. This was just what Julyan wanted; but it was not at all what the dismayed Spurling wanted. To Spurling's mind the Colonel was behaving most unwisely and unnecessarily. The facts, as they stood, were ugly enough in all conscience; why the dickens enhance their ugliness by exhibiting them in the lurid and essentially false aspect of a premeditated plan? Because that was what the Colonel, whether he was aware of it or not, was doing. Moreover, there was in all probability worse to come. Seated at the far end of the hall was a motionless, sable-clad figure towards which Spurling kept casting uneasy glances. A thick crape veil concealed Margery's features; but he imagined them distorted by grief and rage, and, knowing what she was, he felt very sure that her impulse would be to take vengeance upon somebody. He was strongly tempted to go and whisper a few words of caution in her ear; but he could hardly venture to give himself the air of prompting a witness. Indeed, for anything that he knew—not being very familiar with the rules and procedure in force at courts of inquiry—he might not be permitted to do so. It was at least something that she did not appear to be excited, and it was also a very fortunate thing that there had been no encounter between her and Miss Monk at Colonel Julyan's cottage.

Her crazy jealousy, it might be hoped, was dormant; although it was perhaps too much to hope for that she would refrain from some public washing of dirty linen.

Miss Margery Vernon was called as soon as Julyan had retired. She advanced, threw back her veil, displaying a white, drawn face, framed in a widow's cap ("By Jove! how quickly women can rig themselves out when they choose!" Spurling thought) and said quietly enough:

"That is not my name. I am the Countess of Lavernock, the widow of the murdered man."

This, of course, produced a profound sensation, and a whispered colloquy between the Coroner and those who sat near him ensued. Margery broke in upon it by continuing:

"I have brought proof. Here is a copy of my marriage certificate. For private and family reasons, I did not assume my title——"

The Coroner raised his hand. "Excuse me, madam; I think I had better examine this certificate before you make any further statement."

The certificate appearing to be in order, the oath was duly administered to the witness, who was then requested to produce a letter said to have been addressed to her by her late husband immediately before his death. At first she objected, alleging that the letter concerned nobody but herself; but finally she was persuaded to show it to the Coroner, who, after perusing it, folded it up and returned it to her, remarking:

"I do not think that, for the purposes of this inquiry, the document is one which needs to be read aloud. I

may say that it contains no direct announcement of an intention on the part of the writer to put an end to himself, although it appears to assume that the recipient would shortly find herself unprovided for. The remaining observations are of—er—a domestic nature.”

One of the jury wished to know whether the letter purported to be addressed by a husband to his wife, and the Coroner replied that it did inferentially, if not in explicit terms. The point was not important.

The witness, having related, in answer to questions, how she had dined with her husband at Maidenhead on the last evening of his life and how she had subsequently parted from him at Colonel Julyan’s house, was asked whether he had said anything which could lead her to suppose that the idea of suicide was in his mind.

“Yes,” she replied; “he did. He said that if he was found with his brains blown out in the morning, it would be because he had lost more money at cards that night than he could pay.”

The Coroner looked grave. “Did you regard those words as being seriously spoken?” he inquired.

“Well, I never thought he would do it. He often talked like that, and he was not quite sober at the time.”

“Lady Lavernock,” resumed the Coroner, after a pause, “you spoke just now of your late husband as a murdered man. That was a rather singular expression to employ. I ought perhaps to ask you what you meant by it.”

“Just what I said,” returned Margery, raising her voice suddenly. “My husband was as surely murdered as I stand here. And there,” she added, throwing out

her hand and pointing to Julyan, who was contemplating her with an air of bland curiosity and with the flicker of a smile upon his lips—"there sits his murderer!"

There was a general stir and murmur, as when the advance gust of a coming storm sweeps through the woods; but this died away into intent silence whilst Margery went on to denounce the man who, as she averred, had been her unhappy husband's evil genius. It was Colonel Julyan who, pretending to be his friend, had always acted as his worst enemy; it was from Colonel Julyan that he had acquired the passion for gambling which had proved his destruction; it was Colonel Julyan who, by winning his money again and again, had driven him to drink and despair; it was Colonel Julyan who had driven him at last to his death. The invective was telling and finely delivered. Not for nothing had Margery Vernon gone through a thorough process of dramatic training, and if her distress and wrath were genuine, her gestures and the skilful changes in her voice were creditable products of histrionic art.

"And this robber and murderer," she wound up, "is a lying traitor into the bargain; for on Tuesday evening he gave me his word of honour as a gentleman—I challenge him to deny it!—that he would not play cards with Lavernock that night."

The Coroner had made one or two not very authoritative attempts to check her. He now said: "Lady Lavernock, everybody must sympathise with you; but it is my duty to remind you that you are here to give evidence, not to deliver a speech."

He had, however, allowed her to deliver it, and whatever might be its influence upon the jury within those

walls, there was little doubt as to the verdict which would be pronounced outside them upon an accused person who was not being tried. Colonel Julyan, recalled by request of the jury, admitted having given the alleged promise and regretted that it had not been kept. He added that, as a matter of fact, it had escaped his memory—which was, indeed, true. It further transpired that he had been cognisant of the late Lord Lavernock's secret marriage, and although there was nothing necessarily discreditable to him in that, it somehow seemed to render him a little more despicable in the estimation of his hearers.

The Coroner, in summing up, observed that it might have been more satisfactory to have called Captain Forrester, but that he did not think it imperative to adjourn the inquiry for that purpose. The jury would probably feel that they had heard as much as was needed for their guidance. He proceeded to review the sworn testimony at considerable length, laying a good deal of stress upon the medical evidence as to the deceased's mental condition, and the anticipated verdict of "Suicide while temporarily insane" followed. The jury wished to add that the deceased had not, in their opinion, been in a fit state to play cards for money during the last hours of his life, and that they deeply deplored the circumstances which appeared to have accelerated his loss of reason. The Coroner having signified his concurrence in the sentiments expressed by the above rider, the proceedings terminated.

The Hebrew psalmist, vexed by the apparent prosperity of the ungodly, found comfort in the contemplation of their destined end—"Namely, how

thou dost set them in slippery places, castest them down and destroyest them." It is they themselves who sometimes—not always—venture into those slippery places and, falling ignominiously in the mud, are bespattered by the feet of jeering wayfarers as far removed, perchance, from rectitude as they. This, of course, serves them quite right. After all, we are not to tell lies. No casuistry can do away with that fundamental axiom of human morality which has always been recognised by the most barbarous as well as the most civilised communities and has always been largely neglected by both. It may or may not be expedient to tell a lie; but it never can be right, and those who deliberately decide to take the risk of doing so ought not to complain if punishment more condign than that which befalls the multitude of their fellow sinners should happen to overtake them. Something of this sort was what Julyan had to say to himself in order to keep his courage up and to account for a most disagreeable sensation of abasement. He was not, however, sorry for what he had done. Under one aspect, surely, it had been a rather fine thing to do; since, from the nature of the case, he could never receive any recompense beyond his own knowledge that, while injuring nobody, he had served one person for whose sake he would have been willing to surrender his life. That he could not manage to feel in the least like a man who has done a fine thing, and that he did feel very much like a gentleman who has disgraced himself, was unfortunate; but such is the tyranny of tradition that there was no help for that. One must accept the rough with the smooth, and omelettes cannot be made without breaking of eggs.

What a profusion of eggs—what a profusion of rotten ones—was hurled at the hapless Colonel's head in the course of the few following days may be imagined. He had to see himself described in print as a corrupter of youth, a false friend, a cold-blooded schemer, even as a swindler. There descended upon him a cataract of anonymous letters, testifying to the sentimentality and the exceeding silliness of that British public which once upon a time was slow of speech and which disdained to trample upon the fallen. The post brought other missives, too, which were a good deal harder to bear. These were signed by their writers, who said or implied that they felt bound to stand by an old friend in adversity. Not to a single one of Julyan's correspondents did the idea seem to have presented itself that a man whom they had always known to be honourable in all his dealings could not have played the part attributed to him. What they gave him to understand was that they most sincerely pitied him, that they were sure he must regret what had occurred as much as anybody, and that, for the rest, come what might of it, they were nobly, courageously resolved not to turn their backs upon him. He laughed a little, winced a little and returned no replies. It only remained to tranquillise the convalescent and sorely disquieted Forrester, from whom newspapers could no longer be withheld.

When the young man realised what had come about with his half voluntary connivance, he declared that there was only one thing to be done. He was not yet strong enough to leave his room; but he could put himself in communication with the authorities, he could write to the papers and a monstrous injustice could be repaired.

"I am sure you must know, Colonel," said he reproachfully, "that I should never have been such a cad as to shelter myself behind you if I had been in my sober senses."

"Just so," answered Julyan coolly; "and a very fortunate thing it is that you were not in your sober senses that night. I take the entire responsibility for my actions upon my own shoulders, and I am quite impenitent. If you think you are in any way indebted to me, perhaps you will show your gratitude by holding your tongue."

That, Forrester returned, was utterly out of the question. He did not consider that poor Lavernock's death lay at his door; but if other people chose to think so, they must. Anyhow, they could not be allowed to go on vilifying an innocent man.

"Ah, well!" sighed Julyan, "that's the way of the world, I suppose. Help lame dogs over stiles and it's ten chances to one that they bite you through your hand for your pains. I don't remember exactly what one gets for wilful and corrupt perjury; but it may run to several years' penal servitude, I believe. It will be great sport for you, no doubt, to see me at Portland or Princetown with my hair cut; but I must say that I hardly expected to be denounced by the very fellow whom I was trying to befriend."

"They would never send you to prison!" exclaimed Forrester, aghast.

"My good man, they would have no choice. A burglar who perjured himself to screen a pal—I daresay they do sometimes—wouldn't be let off; much less an educated gentleman. Look here, Forrester; what has

been done can't possibly be undone. It may have been immoral ; but I thought it justifiable at the time, and I think so still. This public hubbub will soon blow over ; other sensations crop up and the stale ones are forgotten. My case, remember, isn't half as bad as yours would have been, because I am not—Heaven be praised!—engaged to a young lady of umbrageous instincts. I grant you that, in spite of some defects, she is an extremely charming young lady, and I hope to see you very happy with her before long. Now are you going to be sensible and keep silence ? ”

Forrester sank back upon his pillows and groaned. “ I don't know what to say,” he confessed. “ It looks as if I couldn't speak out, and yet I don't see how I am to sit down under this. I wish I could consult somebody else ! ”

“ Well, you can't. Not that anybody out of a lunatic asylum would advise you otherwise than as I have done. Now there are three things for you to bear in mind, please : firstly, that this has been my doing, not yours, throughout ; secondly, that it is irrevocable, and thirdly, that I shall regard any further allusion to it on your part as an unfriendly act.”

CHAPTER XIX

TWO UNMANAGEABLE WOMEN

Nemo repente fuit turpissimus. Notwithstanding the grief, horror and amazement with which Helen heard of her cousin's death and its cause, there hovered at the back of her mind some half-admitted incredulity as to Colonel Julyan's guilt. She told herself that she had never liked the man nor ever wholly trusted him; yet there had been times when she had done both, and—was it to be believed that while she and he had been holding friendly converse on the river that evening, he had been meditating an act of the blackest perfidy? Could it be that the explanation of his odd anxiety to cut her visit short had been simply impatience to fall upon his destined prey? That he had broken a solemn promise there could be no doubt, and that was unpardonable; but surely, when he should be given an opportunity to speak for himself, he would have some sort of extenuation to plead! So, although Helen listened in acquiescent silence to the diatribes of Lady Elizabeth (inconsolable at the loss of her nephew and the extinction of an ancient title), and although she absolutely refused to listen to the preposterous theory put forward by Miss Bligh, she could not quite accept a theory which seemed to her almost more far-fetched.

But the report of the inquest and of the accompanying revelations was final. Colonel Julyan's bitterest enemy could have said nothing worse of him than what he himself had so unblushingly avowed, and his admission that he had been aware of Lavernock's marriage gave the measure of his duplicity. "Knowing as he did what I took to be my duty, he couldn't have kept such a thing as that from me if he had been commonly honest," Helen thought, without asking herself what possible motive, save loyalty to Lavernock, he could have had for concealing it.

Sometimes she wondered how he liked, or rather how he could endure, the lucubrations and strictures of the newspapers, under which she, for her part, chafed and writhed. That her name should be dragged into print and her family affairs impertinently discussed to gratify the curiosity of any Tom, Dick or Harry who cared to pry into them seemed to her an intolerable abuse of the liberty of the press, and many an editor would have been sent to cool his heels in prison that week if Miss Monk had been entrusted with the authority over contemporary journalism which it so badly needs. One of the weekly prints which came into her hands some ten days after the inquest contained a paragraph which caused her to exclaim indignantly:

"Is there *no* way of punishing these insolent eavesdroppers!"

"That depends," answered Miss Bligh, looking up from the embroidery upon which she was engaged. "If they're libellous you can bring an action for libel against them. Only I believe there's nothing they enjoy more."

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She held out her hand for the paper and perused the offending paragraph, which ran :

“An odd rumour is going the rounds in connection with the recent Lavernock tragedy, which has already proved so fruitful in startling disclosures. It is said that the lady who inherits her late cousin's estates proposes to defray, not only his legal liabilities, but also the debt of honour which he incurred on the fatal evening. It will be interesting to hear in what light this intention is regarded by the gentleman who has publicly owned to having won a very large sum of money on that occasion.”

“Ah,” observed Miss Bligh ; “and the unfortunate thing about this rumour is that it's true.”

“Of course it is true,” returned Helen impatiently ; “but how can it be ‘going the rounds’ ? I haven't breathed a word upon the subject to anybody, except to you and Aunt Elizabeth and, by letter, to Mr. Blandford.”

“Well, my dear, that makes three, and I can't answer for the innocence of more than one. After all, Helen, I hardly see why you should be so thin-skinned. You don't mean showing much mercy to Colonel Julyan's skin.”

“Susie, I have told you already that I would rather not hear Colonel Julyan's name mentioned.”

“Is it permitted to mention Captain Forrester's name ? ”

“Not if you are going to repeat your extravagant nonsense about his having played with poor Lavernock and lost. Captain Forrester seems to have behaved like a gentleman throughout. No one has dared to insinuate

that he was in any sense an accomplice in that shameful business."

"I may be very dense," said Miss Bligh, "but I don't understand why it is more shameful to win than to lose, or what there is so particularly like a gentleman in having an opportune attack of influenza. And it strikes me, Helen, that you wouldn't be so bent upon wounding a person whose name I am not allowed to mention if you weren't——"

She was prevented from concluding a sentence which would have been, to say the least of it, ill-advised by the entrance of Mr. Blandford, the family lawyer. She gathered up her work and left the room, as the clean-shaven, white-haired old man, who had called by appointment to see Miss Monk, advanced, smiling in a somewhat deprecatory fashion.

Mr. Blandford began by observing that he was glad to be accorded a personal interview at last. Understandings were so much more easily arrived at by word of mouth than by correspondence, and he thought that Miss Monk was under a not unnatural misapprehension as to her legal position.

"You evidently regard yourself as the late Lord Lavernock's successor, and so, in the ordinary course of things, you would have been. But, you see, it is now an ascertained fact that there is a lawful Countess of Lavernock; whence it follows that there may in due time be a lawful Earl of Lavernock."

"Surely," said Helen, "that is in the last degree improbable!"

The lawyer raised his hands and his eyebrows. "It may be so; really I am not qualified to venture upon a

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prophecy. But the law, of course, has to contemplate possibilities. Which explains why I am unable to carry out your instructions with regard to your late cousin's debts."

"I must have expressed myself badly," said Helen. "What I wish to do is to pay, out of my own money and for my own satisfaction, every penny that Laver-nock owed at the time of his death. And I wish to do this at once."

"That, my dear young lady, is impracticable. I am not prepared to say that I would furnish you at once with a list of the late Earl's liabilities if I could; but it is certain that I couldn't if I would. A considerable number of months must necessarily elapse before all claims can be got in."

"Well, at any rate," said Helen, "there is one debt of which the amount can be stated at once, and I consider it, for several reasons, as the most pressing."

"Ah, you allude to the subject about which you wrote to me. Well, I am by no means sure that Colonel Julyan will state the amount that he won on that disastrous evening—he declined to specify it at the inquest, you may remember—but I am absolutely sure that it is out of the question for you to pay it. Apart from the impossibility of his accepting payment from a lady——"

"I doubt," broke in Helen coldly, "whether Colonel Julyan is a man to whom that would seem impossible."

"I was going to say that, apart from that, you have, as matters stand, no authority to act as your late cousin's representative."

"But I thought I had explained, Mr. Blandford,

that it is not a question of legal authority. Debts of honour are not recoverable at law, are they? You are not giving me your real reasons for objecting. What you really mean is that you do not wish me to be deprived of a large sum of money."

"Oh, I mean more than that," said the lawyer.

Helen smiled. "Yes, I know—I quite understand. But I must be the judge of my own actions. Will you, whether you approve or not, write to Colonel Julyan and say I wish to know what is owing to him?"

"No, Miss Monk, I will not," replied Mr. Blandford, turning at bay. "As your legal adviser, I must decline to do anything so irregular; as a man of peace, I will be no party to conveying gratuitous insults; and as an old friend of your family, I will not help you to involve yourself in a rather scandalous affair with which you have no concern."

"Very well," said Helen; "then I must write to Colonel Julyan myself. It will be disagreeable and humiliating——"

"I hope so," interpolated the lawyer drily.

"It will; but you leave me no alternative."

"You have an obvious alternative," Mr. Blandford was beginning; but his voice died away as the door was suddenly flung open to give passage to Margery, who entered like a whirlwind, her black cloak thrown back from her shoulders and her long crape veil streaming out behind her, while she brandished a newspaper in her hand.

"Mercy upon us, here comes the other one!" he ejaculated under his breath. "Oh, these ladies!"

Margery caught sight of him and stopped short.

"Hullo!" she said; "so *you're* here, are you? Well, you can bear witness that I ask for nothing more than my rights. That butler of yours," she went on, turning to Helen, whose movement as if to shake hands with her she ignored, "wanted to make out that you weren't at home, but I told him you would jolly well have to be at home to me."

Helen had long before this decided that her cousin's widow must be accepted as a relation by marriage. She said: "Won't you sit down? I am quite sure that nobody will attempt to deprive you of your rights; they are fully recognised."

"Thank you for nothing!" retorted Margery, with an indescribable mixture of defiance and dejection. "I suppose you mean that you won't dispute my right to use a countess's coronet. You can't." She jerked her thumb towards Mr. Blandford, adding, "*He'll* tell you that. He'll tell you, too, that there's no money for me, nor likely to be any. It isn't money that I want."

"Would it be too presumptuous, then," Mr. Blandford suavely asked, "to inquire what you do want, Lady Lavernock?"

"Not at all," answered Margery. "I want Miss Monk to understand, and I want you to understand, that I won't be interfered with. If anybody represents my husband—my murdered husband—I do, and nobody else shall dare to talk about paying his debts."

"Ah," remarked Mr. Blandford, looking at Helen and spreading out his hands, "there you are, you see!"

"Perhaps," said Helen, "if Lady Lavernock and I were to talk matters over, we should find that there was no occasion for us to disagree. I don't think I need

take up your time any longer today, Mr. Blandford. As you cannot see your way to oblige me in the manner that I spoke of just now, there is nothing more to be said at present."

The lawyer accepted his dismissal willingly enough. He had had a great deal of trouble with Margery, whom he took to be insane, and Helen, if in some respects aggressively sane, was, by his way of thinking, too obstinate and perverse to be open to reason. "Let them fight it out," he thought. "At least they'll let off some superfluous steam, and maybe that's what they both require."

It was what one of them seemed disposed to do without further delay. Pale, haggard and wild-eyed, Margery was barely recognisable as the flippant little dancer whose impudent stare had caused Helen such discomfort at the theatre and at Ascot; but now, as then, there was something about her vaguely menacing which in a measure redeemed the vulgarity of her accent and address.

"You may have guessed what brought me here," she began, tapping with the fingers of one hand the newspaper which she held in the other. "At least, if you've seen what this dirty rag says about 'rumours.' Oh, you have, eh? Well, are they lies or not, those rumours?"

"They are unauthorised," answered Helen; "I can't say that they are untrue. Lavernock's debts must be paid, and surely, if you will consider for a moment, you will see that I ought to pay them."

"I don't then!" returned Margery, with a lowering brow. "Why should you pay up for him? Because you loved him, and because you think he loved you?"

"No; there was no question of love between us——

"I don't believe it!" interrupted Margery fiercely.

"I am speaking the truth. I did care very much for him in another way; but it is not on that account that I make my claim. It is for the perfectly simple and commonplace reason that I succeed to his property and that I have already inherited money which should have been his. Let me be quite frank with you. I might have married him if he had asked me and if he had been free, as I supposed he was; but I never wanted to marry him, and I did not love him."

Margery seldom remained in the same mood for two minutes together. On a sudden all the fire faded out of her weebegone eyes, her lips quivered piteously, and—"Didn't you?" said she in a low, moaning voice. "*I did! Yes, and he loved me—once. Oh, not latterly. He was sick of me. He treated me vilely, and I didn't treat him any too well. All that makes no difference. I don't care to live now that I shall never see him again. I'd kill myself, as he did, if—if——*"

She snatched a handkerchief out of her pocket and began to cry unrestrainedly, noisily, like a child. It was impossible not to pity the poor, passionate, undisciplined creature. To Helen, the product of many generations of disciplined, self-restrained people, it was distressing and a little incomprehensible that any mortal should behave like that; but she said and did what womanly sympathy dictated. Margery allowed herself to be soothed, agreed that there was "some sense" in the contention that a man's heirs ought to be held accountable for his debts and confessed that she had neither the slightest knowledge of what Lavernock's

liabilities had been nor, probably, funds anything like adequate to meet them.

"I expect you had better settle with the creditors," she said wearily. But then, abruptly changing her tone, "Not with Colonel Julyan, though! Not with that lying thief!"

"With Colonel Julyan before anybody else," answered Helen firmly; "and just because he is something like what you call him. You wish, I suppose, to be avenged upon him——"

"I'm going to be, if I die for it!" struck in Margery, her eyes blazing once more.

"Well, I am not sure that it is worth while to take vengeance upon a man who is beneath contempt; but at least I cannot remain in his debt."

"Do you tell me," shrieked Margery, springing to her feet, "that you are going to make that villain rich?"

"I don't know yet what his winnings amounted to, but certainly I am going to pay them, whatever they were. Can't you understand that if we wanted to hurt and humble him, we could hardly do so more effectually than by throwing him his gains and allowing him no excuse to pretend that he has been a loser through his victim's death?"

"No," answered Margery, "I can't. Hurt and humble him by stuffing his pockets full of bank-notes? That may be your notion of revenge, but it isn't mine. I want to get even with him! I want to ruin him! I'd be glad to die this moment if I could be sure of having made him wish he'd never been born!"

"I don't wonder at your hating him," said Helen

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quietly; "I think myself that he is hateful. Only, if we can't forgive our enemies, we can't condescend to rob them, can we?"

But Margery was not to be pacified. She broke out into a torrent of incoherent imprecations, swearing that though Helen and all the world were in league against her, they should find that she could fight for her own hand and beat them too. Then, without an instant's warning, she burst out crying again, grew hysterical, had to be stretched upon a sofa, and ended by fainting away. Helen, who did not wish to summon the servants if she could help it, managed, by means of cold water, smelling-salts, and loosening the woman's clothes, to revive her; but when Margery recovered consciousness, she seemed to be utterly dazed and prostrated.

"Sorry," she muttered thickly, as she struggled into a sitting posture "Couldn't help it. I'm going now."

"You must not think of going yet," Helen felt bound in common humanity to protest; "but perhaps, if I helped you, you could walk as far as my bedroom, where you can lie down and rest until you feel better. It is only a few steps."

The move was accomplished, not without some difficulty, Margery offering no resistance, but appearing scarcely capable of putting one foot before the other. Helen did what she could to make her comfortable, sat beside her while she gradually sank into a sort of stupor, which might or might not be the prelude to natural sleep, and then, stealing softly back to the drawing-room, rang the bell.

"Tell Miss Bligh I want to see her at once," she said to the butler, who answered:

"Yes, ma'am. Miss Bligh is in the library with Major Spurling."

This was good news, and Helen drew a quick breath of relief. "Oh, then, as Major Spurling is in the house," said she, "will you ask him to be so kind as to come upstairs and see Lady Lavernock in my bedroom? She is not very well."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the butler, preserving an unmoved countenance, though no doubt he was inwardly consumed with curiosity. "And I was to ask if you would receive Captain Forrester for a few minutes, ma'am. He said he would wait until you were disengaged."

Of course Helen would receive Captain Forrester, and greatly rejoiced was she to have this proof of his recovery. If she had held no direct communication with him during his illness, it was not because she had been unmindful of him, but only because she had felt unable to write. She had, however, a great deal to say to him, a great deal to hear from him, and she told herself, with satisfaction and with a certain vicarious pride, that from him, at all events, she would hear nothing but the truth. Other people might be false, other people might be blinded by prejudice or delusion; but Eustace Forrester was always straightforward, always transparently veracious. He could not—bless him!—be anything else if he tried.

CHAPTER XX

THE FULFILMENT OF SEVERAL DESTINIES

"I SHOULD be the last person in the world," observed Miss Bligh, "to turn round upon you with 'Didn't I tell you so!' There's a meanness about that sort of triumph over the dull-witted which is foreign to my whole nature. All the same, I may be allowed to protest against your imparting to me as a remarkable discovery of your own what I saw from the very first moment."

"Don't be in such a hurry," returned Spurling; "I never said I had come round to your wild notion that the Colonel deliberately made a scapegoat of himself for Forrester's sake. What I did say was that there is more behind all this than anybody has heard yet, and that I'm troubled in my mind about it."

He looked so. He was an honest, kind-hearted mortal who did not wish to be a consenting party to injustice of any kind, and, being by no means as dull-witted as Miss Bligh was pleased to call him, he had drawn certain conclusions from what he had heard and seen since the painful exposure brought about by the inquest. So he had come to St. James's Square this time less for the purpose of administering comfort than in the hope of receiving some.

"Serves you right if you are!" said Miss Bligh unsympathisingly; "you never ought to have allowed matters to reach such a pass. But it's useless to cry over spilt milk. Your patient is convalescent now, you say, and both he and Colonel Julyan have returned to London?"

Spurling nodded. "Rather a mistake on the Colonel's part, I can't help thinking. I wanted him to go off to Norway and fish."

"Never mind that just now. I gather that, from what they have both let fall, you have arrived at the conviction that there's a secret between them and that, if it were known, it wouldn't redound to young Forrester's credit."

Spurling rubbed the back of his head. "I won't go quite such lengths; only I don't see why the Colonel keeps on impressing upon me that I must refuse to answer any questions about the affair, and I don't see why he made out such a very much worse case for himself before the Coroner than he need have done. As for Forrester, he's frightfully cut up--thinks something ought to have been said at the inquest about his having sat down to play with Lavernock (I agree with him there), calls it infernally unjust that the whole blame should be thrown upon the Colonel, and so forth. Perhaps, after all, that's enough to account for his being so down in the mouth."

"Perhaps it isn't," retorted Miss Bligh. "Perhaps you know it isn't, David; only you're too obstinate to own that you were duped by a yarn which wouldn't have taken in a child of average intelligence."

"Now, Susan," said Spurling, drawing himself up in his chair and assuming a more authoritative mien,

"oblige me by looking matters in the face. Either the statement to which the Colonel deposed on oath was true or it was false. If it was false, what was his motive for perjuring himself? It would have had to be a deuce of a strong one!"

"Probably it *was* a deuce of a strong one," Miss Bligh returned. "He wouldn't have committed perjury out of sheer good nature to a young fellow in a fix, you think? No; I don't suppose he would. But what if he and that young fellow had both been in love with the same woman? What if he had seen very clearly that one or other of them was bound to offend her past all redemption in consequence of the catastrophe that had happened? What if he had said to himself—as he may well have done, for he is an absurdly modest man—that there could be little chance for him in any case, but that there might be something more than a chance for the other? What then?"

Really that wouldn't do, Spurling was afraid. Colonel Julyan an absurdly modest man with women! "Besides, you're only putting into other words the same suggestion that you've just discarded. Didn't we agree that the Colonel wouldn't have stood in the pillory for Forrester's sake?"

"What I suggest, my good David, is that he did it for Helen's sake, and if that strikes you as extravagant, it only shows that you don't know much—how should you?—about the modesty and capacity for self-sacrifice of heroic persons in love. Admit at least that Colonel Julyan is heroic. I know you think so."

"Oh, well!" answered Spurling, a little irritated and out of his depth.

In certain ways he did consider Colonel Julian something of a hero, although he had never been accustomed to think of him as heroic or romantic in his relations with the other sex. There might, to be sure, be developments and refinements of heroism in that connection which must remain incomprehensible to a plain man; one comes across that sort of thing in poems and plays, hardly in real life. But it is never very agreeable to be reminded of one's limited perceptions, and why was Susan Bligh, of all people, to talk down to him as from sublime heights of appreciation above his range? Hang it all! there hadn't been anything so very sublime or romantic about Susan's dealings with her own love affairs in days gone by.

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, after she had expatiated somewhat further upon her theme; "but, admitting for the sake of argument, or rather for the sake of saving argument, that you have hit the nail on the head, what is there to be done?"

"That's a very easy question to answer," Miss Bligh declared. "Helen must be undeceived, and it will be my duty and yours to undeceive her."

"I don't know that we can. Moreover, before we decide to upset the apple-cart, let us at least make sure that the right people will pick up the apples. The Colonel will hardly thank us for our interference if we do the very thing which, according to you, he has perjured himself to avert, and if we separate a pair of lovers, we shan't get much gratitude from them either."

"My dear David, Helen is no more in love with young Forrester than I am, and as for him, his feelings really needn't be considered. He must indeed be a poor

sort of creature if he is willing to be acquitted at the expense of a much better man than himself!"

It was at this juncture that the butler came in and delivered Helen's message in a confidential undertone.

"Oh, very well," answered Spurling; "I'll be upstairs in a minute."

"Here's a stupid business!" he remarked to Miss Bligh, when the man had left the room. "Margery Vernon's in the house, ill or shamming ill. One never knows what that woman will be up to next! Well, I had better go and see what's the matter. Wait for me here, like a good soul, and for the love of Heaven don't blurt out your ideas or suspicions until I give you leave! Never any harm in reserving one's fire, remember."

As he crossed the hall he caught sight of Forrester, waiting patiently in an adjoining morning room, but did not pause to greet him. "Who knows but that the fellow may have come here to make some sort of a confession?" he thought. "Better leave him alone."

What sort of a confession Forrester had come to make he himself did not know; nor could he in the least tell what sort of a reception was in store for him. He had called because he had felt unable to remain away any longer; but he was more apprehensive than sanguine, painfully conscious of being an unwilling impostor, divided between strong desire to make a clean breast of everything and a conviction that neither Helen nor Julyan would ever forgive him if he did. It was in this forlorn state of uncertainty and trepidation, the like of which he had never before experienced in his life, that he mounted the broad staircase; so it was only natural that he should feel as if dawn had

dispelled the black shades of night when Helen came quickly forward to welcome him, with smiling lips and eyes.

"Oh, but you *do* look ill!" she exclaimed commiseratingly. "Have you thought it horribly unfeeling of me not to write? We have been hearing of your progress through Major Spurling, you know."

"Oh, it was nothing," he answered confusedly; "only a rather sharp touch of fever for a day or two. I never dreamt of your writing; it was I who ought to have written to you, only—well, I knew I couldn't say anything that you would care to hear. And—and I was sure you wouldn't need to be told how awfully sorry I have been——"

His embarrassed incoherency did not displease her. Perhaps it would have been impossible for him to displease her just then, so glad was she to see his brave, handsome face again, so convinced was she of his love and loyalty, so thankful that, in a world instinct with treachery and double dealing, there was one person whom she herself could both trust and love.

"Come and sit down," she said; "I have been longing for a talk with you. Don't mind speaking of poor Lavernock and all the dreadful things that have happened since we last met; you won't hurt me. Though if you would rather not, I shall quite understand."

He was obliged to own that he would rather not. He was shattered and unnerved by a malady which never fails to gravel its victims; he really could not, for the moment, trust himself to enter upon a subject about which he had intended to say at least something. Furthermore, that was not the only, nor even the

principal, subject with which he was concerned. He had something else to say, and before long he became joyously, exultantly aware that Helen wished him to say it. Her voice had taken on an inflection which was new to him; in her eyes, when they met his, there was a soft, almost caressing light; small wonder was it that he forgot fears, scruples and misgivings in the ecstasy of realising that his victory was as good as won. Then on a sudden, after he knew not what rapid interchange of words, all was over. Helen was in his arms; he had heard from her own lips that she loved him, and—his ships were burnt!

Such was the very phrase that he inwardly employed in the midst of more or less articulate jubilation; so sure, so swift is Nemesis! He had taken the plunge; he could not now retrace his steps; he had drawn from Helen an avowal which she might never have made, had she been told what perhaps she ought to have been told, but what it had, by that fact, become impossible to tell her. Somehow he had not expected that he would feel like a mean sneak under circumstances which he had to some extent foreseen; but that was just what he did feel like, and of course Helen was not long in noticing his uneasiness. In reply to her questions, he owned that there was one thing which weighed rather heavily upon his mind.

"I'm afraid you must have been set against poor Colonel Julyan by all the beastly things that you will have seen about him in print. The fact of the matter is——"

But Helen checked him instantly. It was with a hard face and in a hard voice that she interrupted:

"Don't go on, please. I know what you are going to say, and I can't listen to it even from you. It is generous of you to wish to stand up for Colonel Julyan, and natural too, I daresay; but nothing can possibly alter my opinion of him. I only hope that I may never see his face again."

Before Forrester had time to make any rejoinder, the butler came in, bearing a card, which Helen took.

"Colonel Julyan!" she ejaculated under her breath; "what effrontery!" Then she looked up and said, raising her voice, "I am not at home."

But Forrester, oblivious of everything except his unfortunate friend's wrongs, intervened impetuously.

"Don't turn him away from your door! I can't stand that! He isn't what *you* think he is. If you'll only see him and hear what he has to say!—Come, Helen, it's the first favour I have asked of you!"

Probably it would have stood a poor chance of being granted but for the absurd, yet cogent factor of the butler's presence. To get rid of that staid, observant functionary was imperative, and Helen, turning to him, said shortly, "Ask the gentleman to come in."

Forrester, profusely grateful, was silenced and dismissed with equal despatch. "Since I must see him, let me see him alone," Helen said. "I don't think our interview will be a long one. Yes, come back tomorrow, but go now. Your being in the room while he was here would only make matters worse."

Helen was standing erect when—after a delay which may have been caused by a meeting on the staircase—her visitor was announced. She neither bowed nor

spoke as he stepped forward, looking, she noticed, somewhat altered and aged, yet perfectly self-possessed.

"It is very kind of you to receive me, Miss Monk," he began.

"I am only receiving intimate friends just now, Colonel Julyan," answered Helen in icy, level accents. "If you have been admitted, it is principally because I wish for an opportunity of speaking to you upon a question of business about which I must, in any case, have spoken or written to you soon."

Julyan inclined his head slightly. "It is with reference to what I may almost call a question of business, Miss Monk, that I have taken the liberty to come here. I don't know whether you have seen a certain false and grossly offensive paragraph which has just appeared in one of the weekly papers——"

"Yes," said Helen. "I have seen it. Well?"

"In his next issue the editor will withdraw the statement and offer a full apology for having made it. I left him a quarter of an hour ago—rather agitated, but sufficiently contrite."

Helen's eyes grew big. "I am not aware of having given you authority to take any such measures on my behalf, Colonel Julyan," said she.

"Pardon me; I was not presuming to act on anybody's behalf but my own, although it occurred to me that you might be glad to hear of action having been taken in the matter. Speaking for myself, I don't, as a rule, care to notice newspaper lies; still I can't allow anybody to assert the possibility of such an insult being offered to me as was suggested in that paragraph."

It may have been a trifle undignified to retort, "I

should not have supposed that you were so sensitive ;” but the words were out of Helen’s mouth before she could stop herself. She added : “ As it happens, the paragraph was not false, and I hardly know why you should describe a quite inevitable business affair—the business affair to which I referred just now, in fact—as an insult. You cannot have forgotten what my cousin’s dying injunction to me was. Will you be so good as to let me know the amount of his debt to you, in order that I may defray it as soon as possible ? ”

“ You enlighten me,” said Julyan. “ I wanted to make sure that you could not see your way to spare me even this.”

“ Really, Colonel Julyan, I see no reason why I should spare you anything. Will you answer my question please ? ”

“ No, Miss Monk, I can’t do that. No record of what Lavernock lost, or supposed that he lost, that evening exists, and, badly as you have every right to think of me, you surely can’t think that I meant to despoil him.”

“ What else can I possibly think ? ”

What indeed ! Unless he wished her to think that, his whole procedure had been senseless from beginning to end, and if he did not mean to exonerate himself, this visit of his was a gratuitous blunder ; for the pretext which he had put forward was palpably insufficient to explain it. He had, in truth, called with some faint hope of partially exonerating himself ; but he saw now, as he might have seen all along, that it would avail him little to plead that he had been forced into playing by Lavernock. His offence, of course,

consisted, not in his having won, but in the flagrant breach of faith which had made it possible for him to do so. However, he bethought him of another plea which seemed worth formulating, if it did but serve to change the subject.

"I met Forrester on the stairs as I came in," said he, "and he whispered to me 'It's all right.' May I inquire whether he meant what I presume he did, and whether I may congratulate him?"

"I have no objection," answered Helen coldly, "to your knowing that I am engaged to be married to Captain Forrester."

"Then I should like to congratulate you as well as him; for you are going to marry a good fellow and a thorough gentleman. He doesn't need my praise, and you don't want my congratulations; you heartily despise me, and you would like our acquaintance to terminate. Isn't that so?"

Helen bent her head in uncompromising assent.

"Well, Miss Monk, I have nothing to say for myself; but I foresee that Forrester will have a good deal to say for me. Mistakenly or not, he doesn't consider me a rascal, and, as he has a liking for me, he is sure to urge you to forgive me."

"He has done that already."

"He will keep on doing it, and—we live in a very narrow world; it will be impossible for us to avoid meeting occasionally. Can we not meet—I won't say as friends, but at least upon terms of distant civility?"

Helen made no immediate answer. All this time she had not asked her visitor to sit down, and she herself had remained standing. If anything could have further

embittered her against the man, it would have been this unabashed intrusion, in the course of which he had not breathed one word of regret for his perfidy or for the ruin that he had caused, and which appeared to have been prompted solely by a sense of the value of her public recognition. Certainly she could not forgive him, and she strongly felt that she ought not to be expected to receive him in her house. Yet Eustace could scarcely be expected, or even requested, to cut his old commanding officer, whom he so strangely continued to hold in affection. She moved away a few paces and gazed reflectively out of the window.

"I understand what you mean," she said slowly at length; "it would be better, no doubt, to avoid awkwardness and embarrassment, if that could be managed. I can but say plainly that it will always be very disagreeable to me to meet you, Colonel Julyan; but I will try to behave politely to you, upon one condition. I must first pay you what my cousin killed himself because he was unable to pay."

"I have told you," answered Julyan, following her to the window, "that I cannot comply with that condition. But, Miss Monk, does it not strike you that you may be under a delusion as to the cause of poor Lavernock's death? You assume that he killed himself because he had lost more money to me than he could pay——"

"There is his own written declaration that he did!" interrupted Helen.

"He did not quite say that, if you remember. Besides, the motives which a man alleges for committing suicide are not always his real ones. Lavernock's friends knew very well that he was being persecuted and

tormented beyond all bearing by a half-demented termagant; although nobody, except myself may have suspected that he had committed the amazing folly of marrying her."

At the sound of a choking cry close behind them they both started round—to find themselves confronted with Margery, whose entrance must have been noiselessly effected whilst they were talking, and who had evidently overheard Julyan's last sentence.

"You dare to speak of me like that!" she gasped—"you!"

She was deadly pale, she was shaking from head to foot. In her black draperies and with an accusing arm extended towards Julyan, she symbolised outraged bereavement and denunciation—not ineffectively.

Helen, stepping forward, laid her hand upon the unhappy woman's shoulder and said gently, "Come away; you will only make yourself ill again."

But Margery threw her off. "Leave me alone!—you're all standing in together against me! Do you think I don't see through your game? After a little fuss, for form's sake, that man is to be pardoned and received back into society, and he'll take your money, rather than hurt your feelings. Oh, you hypocrite!"

"You don't know what you are saying," Helen remonstrated. "I am not a hypocrite."

"Yes, you are!" retorted the other fiercely. "If you weren't, you would tell your servants to kick this man out of your house, instead of making bargains with him. And as for you," she shouted, wheeling round upon Julyan, "you're a perjured liar!"

"That may be," Julyan assented, smiling slightly;

"but you must not come here and make a disturbance if I am."

Then, as she continued to rave at the top of her voice, he took her by the elbow, very much as a policeman might have done, and resolutely marched her towards the door. She wrenched herself free and, mad with rage, struck him full in the face with her fist, shrieking, "How dare you lay hands upon me, you hound!"

Perhaps he ought not to have laid hands upon her in the first instance; but it seemed to him absolutely necessary to do so now; for he saw that she was to all intents and purposes a lunatic and that, for Miss Monk's safety, she must be removed. A tussle ensued which Helen, horrified and indignant, was unable to arrest and in which Margery proved herself possessed of all a mad-woman's physical strength. On a table within her reach lay a long Moorish knife in a silver scabbard. In an instant she caught sight of it, seized it and, flinging away the sheath, brandished it aloft.

"Now!" she panted—"now!"

"Give me that knife," said Julyan, himself a little out of breath.

Margery burst into a yelling laugh. "Give it you? Oh, yes, I'll give it you! Where will you have it?"

Helen sprang forward; but it was too late. Like a flash the sharp knife, which Julyan had attempted to clutch, was plunged into his breast. He reeled back, swayed for a moment and then fell heavily to the ground, while Margery fled out of the room and down the stairs, laughing wildly and crying aloud—

"I've killed him! I've killed him! Hurrah! I've killed him!"

CHAPTER XXI

FORRESTER FIGHTS HIS MUZZLE

THE Secretary of State for the Colonies, who had spent a busy afternoon at his office, was making his way down Whitehall to the House when a vociferous urchin, armed with special editions, thrust a handbill under his nose. "HORRIBLE TRAGEDY IN HIGH LIFE. COUNTESS ASSASSINATES DISTINGUISHED OFFICER"—such was the thrilling intelligence offered in return for the Right Honourable gentleman's halfpenny, which he produced with a qualm of prescient alarm.

"Ten to one it's *our* Countess," he said to himself—and sure enough it was! The narrative, printed in pale ink under the heading of "Stop Press News," was a brief and meagre one; but it gave the name of the murdered man and that of his assailant, the Countess of Laver-nock, "better known as Miss Margery Vernon," while the scene of the crime was accurately stated. Mr. Barton was much shocked, as well as intensely annoyed. He could not help feeling that this sort of thing was rather rough upon a prominent politician and that people really ought to have a little more consideration for others than to keep on behaving in such outrageous style. To have had your nephew melodramatically

cutting his throat, after wedding an actress and gambling away every penny he possessed, was surely sufficient for one season ! But no ; here was his disreputable widow in a fair way to get herself hanged ; and although a blameless man's colleagues may talk kindly and sympathetically, the fact remains that episodes of so very unpleasant a nature are bound to react upon him to his disadvantage. Some allowance may be made for poor Mr. Barton, who was not particularly selfish nor at all hardhearted, but who did more than ever deplore the sad mistake of conferring independence upon young women. Why the deuce must Helen have the ignored Lady Lavernock in her house ? Why have the disgraced Julian there ? Why, above all, allow them to meet, when anybody might have foreseen that they would fight if they did ? Why, he might almost as well have added, keep deadly weapons lying upon your drawing-room table ? What is to be will be, and if we began to take remote improbabilities into account, we should all worry ourselves with futile precautions to an even greater extent than we do.

Mr. Barton hailed a hansom, jumped into it and told the man to drive to St. James's Square ; but, changing his mind presently, had himself conveyed home. Better see Elizabeth first, he thought. He may have had a vague notion that there would be some small solace in mildly reproaching Elizabeth for possessing such relations.

Lady Elizabeth was in the act of stepping out of her carriage when her husband reached South Audley Street. She had just returned from St. James's Square, she had heard everything and, although naturally agitated, was

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far from taking the view that her people had brought, or could bring, shame upon those connected with them by marriage.

"After all, John," she remarked, in reply to some rather querulous ejaculations, "I suppose we are big enough to carry it off."

That, indeed, was the faith in which she had been reared, and to which for her comfort, she was able to adhere. The Monks were a very ancient, distinguished and once powerful Whig family. Of course, like other families, they had had their black sheep and their annals contained some regrettable pages; still, when all was said and done, they were not quite the same as Browns, Joneses or Robinsons. Not quite the same as Bartons either; for the Right Honourable John's pedigree terminated abruptly with a nebulous great-grandfather.

"Besides," she added presently, "the man isn't dead yet."

"Oh, isn't he?" asked Mr. Barton, a good deal relieved. "Well, that's something."

"Yes: only he will die, I believe. It sounds too shocking to say 'Serve him right!' yet, when one thinks of all the trouble that he has caused——"

"He'll cause a lot more if he dies," Mr. Barton gloomily observed. "Where is he? In Helen's house, I suppose."

"No; they sent for an ambulance and had him taken home. As luck would have it, that military surgeon, whose name I forget, happened to be on the spot, and he seems to have done all that could be done."

"H'm! What about the woman?"

"In custody, I believe, but raving mad and not at all likely to be in a condition to be brought up before a magistrate tomorrow. It would be all the better, of course, if police-court proceedings could be dispensed with. Perhaps you might be able to arrange that with the Home Secretary or whoever it is."

"Unfortunately, my powers don't extend quite that length. However if the woman is really mad, there can be no question of hanging her, which is so far satisfactory. It's almost a pity that she didn't put an end to herself while she was at it."

"It's quite a pity, and it appears that she did try; but the surgeon man—with the best intentions, no doubt—got the knife away from her, and then Helen kept her quiet until a couple of policemen came. Helen said she was sorry about having had to call in the police, but there seemed to be no help for it. And I was to tell you that she would be ready to give evidence tomorrow, if necessary."

"It will certainly be necessary. I must say she takes things pretty coolly."

"Oh, that's Helen. She'd take the Day of Judgment coolly. All the same, it must have been a horrible experience for her, and one can only hope that it will have taught her a lesson."

"I hope so, I'm sure. If this doesn't, nothing will!"

What was the precise nature of the lesson which they desired to see enforced these two good people did not specify to one another, nor perhaps very distinctly to themselves; but what they both keenly felt was that, after all the revelations which had been made, their niece ought not to have received Colonel Julian. Everybody

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would want to know why she had done so ; some people might put an ugly construction upon her having done so ; nobody would believe that Colonel Julyan had called uninvited upon the cousin and heiress of his recent victim ; nobody would doubt that he himself had fallen a victim to the frenzy of a deeply wronged woman.

To all these unpleasant probabilities Helen was fully alive. The truth, she saw, would have to be told ; but it would not sound much like the truth. Her acquaintances were well aware that she had made an intimate friend of Colonel Julyan ; she was known to have gone down to Ascot with him and to have dined with him on the night of Lavernock's suicide ; it was also pretty well known that, believing her cousin to be a bachelor, she had regarded him as in some sort her appointed husband. Under such circumstances, it did not look well for her to have been closeted with the man who had achieved her cousin's removal, nor did the sudden fury of the widow, on finding them together, appear incomprehensible. Helen retained her composure because, as her aunt had said, it was natural to her to be composed in moments of emergency ; but for the first time in her life she made acquaintance with that intense, ignoble longing to run away which only the fortunate few can boast of having never experienced.

Of course one does not run away ; as a general rule, one cannot. Helen had to stand her ground, like other people, and, like most other people, escaped without further humiliation than the secret consciousness of having harboured a craven desire. When the time came for her to say what had to be said in the police court,

she gave her evidence lucidly and unhesitatingly; only, as soon as the short ordeal was at an end and the case had been adjourned, in order that inquiry might be made into the mental condition of the prisoner (who was, after all, placed in the dock, but who appeared to be in a state of collapse) she confessed to Miss Bligh that for no earthly consideration would she live through the events of the past fortnight again.

"Oh, well," said Miss Bligh, who had herself derived mental and physical relief from copious action of the lachrymal glands, "you won't have to live through them, or anything like them, again. It has been ghastly; but it's over. And, from what David Spurling said to me just now, I do believe that there's quite a fair chance of the poor dear man's pulling through. Every hour that he lives increases his resisting power; those were David's own words."

"I hope he will recover—if he wishes to recover," said Helen. "There are worse things than death, though."

"You have done your utmost to bring that conviction home to him, anyhow. But you can't—now that he is hovering between life and death—surely, Helen, you can't go on being so bitter and unjust!"

"I don't think I am bitter," Helen answered. "I won't, because he is at death's door, pretend to think that I have ever been unjust to him."

"You have been more unjust to Colonel Julyan," Miss Bligh declared, with emphasis, "than you could have found it in your heart to be to anyone for whom you did not care a great deal."

Helen sighed wearily. "Perhaps," said she, "I had

better tell you now, Susie, that I am going to marry Eustace Forrester."

"You aren't!" exclaimed Miss Bligh, with a start of consternation.

"Yes; but don't let us talk about it for the present. I only wanted to make you understand how wide of the mark you are when you suppose that I could ever have cared for Colonel Julyan in the way you are always hinting at."

Miss Bligh was not convinced. She had a theory, based upon what she believed to be a tolerably accurate appreciation of her former pupil's character, and when theories are not borne out by fact, it is only natural to conclude that there must be something amiss with the facts. However, she was silenced for the moment, (which was all that Helen wanted), and later in the day she indemnified herself by talking matters over at considerable length with Spurling, who called to report that there was no change in Julyan's condition.

"You may be right," Spurling conceded, after listening to her patiently for a quarter of an hour, "although it looks to me like rather more than a shade of odds on your being wrong. Either way, you'll do no good by telling Miss Monk that she has engaged herself to an impostor. According to you, that's what Forrester is; but she would be deuced unlikely to take your word for it."

"She mustn't be allowed to marry him in ignorance of what he is," said Miss Bligh obstinately. "I haven't called the man an impostor; for anything I know, he may be able to clear himself. But what I maintain is that some explanation from him is due both to Helen

and to Colonel Julyan ; and, as you agree with me, David, you needn't say you don't out of sheer love of contradiction."

"Sheer love of peace, my dear Susan, almost always restrains me from contradicting you, and the same excellent motive ought to restrain you, for the present, at all events, from stirring up more trouble. What I have got to do just now—and it will be no easy job, I can tell you—is to save the Colonel's life. When that has been done, it will be time enough to think about patching up his character."

"Oh, for the present," Miss Bligh assented, "the main thing, no doubt, is to save his life. For the present, that's as much as I ask of you ; although I may want you to back me up later. I know very well," she added, with a sigh, "that if I am to make any impression upon Helen, I shall have to be backed up by other people into the bargain. By Captain Forrester himself for one."

Forrester might be forced to back her up, whether he liked it or not. Of this she became persuaded a few days afterwards, when she intercepted him as he was leaving the house, beckoned him into the library and said :

"I ought to congratulate you, oughtn't I ?"

The young man laughed a little constrainedly ; for he had a strong impression that Miss Bligh was not as well disposed towards him as she had been. "Oh, thanks very much," he answered. "Yes, certainly I ought to be congratulated. I am a thousand times more fortunate than I deserve to be."

"Not to flatter you, Captain Forrester, I think you

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are; but some people seem to get all the good luck that's going, while others get all the hard knocks. Look at poor Colonel Julyan, for instance!"

Forrester shook his head sorrowfully. "Oh, I know!—it's too awful! But the doctors are beginning to be quite sanguine now."

"So I am glad to hear. The worst of it is that no medical treatment will meet his case. Well, he has only himself to blame for that, you'll say."

"Indeed I don't say anything of the sort!" protested Forrester, with some eagerness.

"You might say so, and naturally you must think so. To me it seems downright incredible that he should have broken a solemn pledge by gambling with Lavernock; but you, who were there at the time, can't be incredulous as to the fact. I don't know whether you can account for it in any way."

"The Colonel didn't want to play; it was Lavernock who would take no denial," said Forrester, looking down.

"I can't quite see Colonel Julyan submitting to be overruled in his own house by a man much younger than himself. When I read the evidence that he gave at the inquest, I felt sure that, anyhow, things couldn't have happened as he seemed to represent, and I was in hopes that we should hear another version of the affair from you as soon as you were well enough to give us one."

Forrester sighed and moved about uneasily. "The fact is, Miss Bligh," said he, "that the Colonel acted for the best, as he thought, and if I could only get Helen to believe it!—But I can't."

"I am sorry for that," observed Miss Bligh pensively, "very sorry for that; because it shows that you can have no real excuse or explanation to offer. Of course, if there were any, you would never keep it back."

"You seem to imply that I am keeping something back," said Forrester, with sudden irritability.

At this Miss Bligh threw up her hands in expostulation. "My dear Captain Forrester, for what do you take me? Or rather, for what can you imagine that I take you? As if any gentleman or any honourable man would let poor Colonel Julyan suffer as he has done unless it were out of his power to help it! No; I must try to believe the incredible, that's all."

Forrester made his escape as quickly as he could. That Miss Bligh did not believe what she called the incredible, and did not mean to try, was manifest; that it was his duty to avow the truth to Helen, even at the risk of killing her love for him, seemed scarcely less so. Yet the secret was not his to divulge; nor, if he was behaving dishonourably, had he consented to do so with his eyes open. Had any man ever before, he wondered, stumbled or been led into such a blind alley as this!

What he decided to do at the expiration of another week, during which his position had been daily growing more and more insupportable to him, was to seek release at head-quarters. Julyan was now well enough to see visitors, Spurling said, provided that they did not stay long and were very careful not to agitate him; so Forrester, having promised to comply with these conditions, was admitted into the sick-room and was not a little shocked by the changed appearance of his former

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chief, whose drawn and absolutely bloodless face might have been that of a corpse. Julyan, however, seemed to be cheerful enough.

"They tell me I'm not going to die this time," he remarked. "They won't let me get off my back yet, which is a bore ; but I'm to be carted down to Maidenhead very soon, I believe, and then I shall have nothing to do but to lie in the garden all day and get well."

He spoke without any emotion or apparent reluctance of the assault which had so nearly cost him his life ; he regretted the annoyance to which Miss Monk must have been subjected and observed that he had always thought Margery queer in her head. "Spurling tells me that she has been shut up in a lunatic asylum and is likely to end her days there, poor thing ! Upon the whole, one has a rather guilty feeling about her, innocent though one was of having done her any injury."

Forrester sprang at the opening. "If you feel like that about her, Colonel, you can imagine how I feel about you. Spurling's orders were that you were not to be agitated ; but I hope you won't mind my just saying that I simply can't stand it any longer. You see, it isn't only the abominable injustice of it all ; it's the having to tell and act lies to Helen every day of my life !"

Julyan showed no sign of agitation. "Yes, it can't be pleasant for you," he answered tranquilly ; "I recognise that, and I'm sorry. You will have to put up with it, though, for I must decline to be given away. It isn't within your capacity to exonerate me, remember ; all you can do is to show me up as a deliberate perjurer.

The young man groaned. "Really, Colonel, I think that's what I shall be obliged to do!"

"Well," returned Julyan, "I am not going into penal servitude to spare you what I admit is some temporary discomfort. Any statement that you may make I shall, of course, contradict, and, as it can be proved that you were light-headed that evening, I leave you to judge which of us has the better chance of being believed."

"At least I must be allowed to tell Helen!" Forrester pleaded. "She can't disbelieve me; she'll—well, God knows how she'll take it; but told she must be. I'm asking this for my own sake, as well as yours—if you understand."

"What I understand very well indeed," replied Julyan, "is the danger of letting any woman into a secret. I have a great regard for Miss Monk; but when all's said, she is a woman, and I don't propose to put myself at her mercy, thank you. Now, Forrester, I am afraid I must ask you to go. You're beginning to make my pulse gallop, and I daresay Spurling may have warned you that if internal hemorrhage should set in, that would finish me like a shot. Be off, my dear boy, and be very sure that the only service you can render me now is to keep your mouth shut tight."

So Forrester had to bear his burden away with him. Sooner or later he would get quit of it; as to that he felt little doubt. But the thought that Miss Bligh, assisted probably by Spurling, would prove the releasing instrument was scarcely a comforting one.

CHAPTER XXII

SENTIMENTAL SUSAN

“Is there any country in the world like our country, or any county in it like our county?” Helen exclaimed.

When summer is approaching its height, when the sky overhead is of a turquoise blue, when light airs from the eastward prevail, when the foliage of oak, beech and elm is still vividly green, and cattle stand knee-deep in the grass, and all distant outlines melt into a quivering haze, the quiet English landscape has a charm which is perhaps lacking to scenes of greater natural grandeur. It is, at all events, tranquillising; and to Helen, escaped at length from the turmoil and daily intrusions of the great city where she had spent so many troubled weeks, it seemed to extend a welcoming maternal embrace which brought tears of sheer relief and contentment into her eyes. Sitting on the broad south terrace at Lavernock House, and watching the shadows of the trees slowly lengthen in the park, which sloped away by a very gradual incline until it lost itself far off in acres of woodlands, she had that sense of being at home, of being spaciouly shut in and shut out, which is dear to many a British heart and was somewhat specially so to hers by virtue of inheritance, habit and association.

"I'm free to confess," agreed Miss Bligh, "that it's uncommonly fine. I don't mean the weather; I mean the whole thing, including you, my dear. One is glad to think that it belongs to you, because you so palpably belong to it and so entirely harmonise. I, of course, don't; it's on far too large a scale for the humble likes of me. However, that doesn't matter, as I'm only a transient blot."

"I wish you wouldn't call yourself transient, Susie!" sighed Helen; "I wish you would consent to be permanent!"

But Miss Bligh was not to be moved from the very sensible resolution which she had announced some days previously. "My dear Helen," said she, "I'll come and pay you visits as often as you're kind enough to ask me; but as for my becoming a regular inmate of this house, there are several good reasons why that wouldn't do at all. For one thing, I shouldn't have sufficient occupation; secondly, Captain Forrester wouldn't like it——"

"But he would!"

"No, he wouldn't. Thirdly, fourthly, fifthly and lastly, I shouldn't, even if he did."

"Ah, there's the true reason! It is Eustace whom you don't like, Susie, and I shall never be able to understand why!"

"I don't dislike him," Miss Bligh declared; "only—I shall never be able to understand why you love him."

"Such things can't very well be explained, can they? One doesn't love a man because he has broad shoulders or blue eyes or a healthy complexion, nor even because he has the qualities which one admires and values most.

Yet I should have thought that anybody could understand what Eustace's attractions are and that everybody must like him for them."

Miss Bligh remained eloquently silent. For her own part, she could not think that Captain Forrester was possessed of all the qualities with which he was credited by his friends, and if he had been he would still have seemed to her a very commonplace young man. She had, however, ended by reluctantly accepting it as a fact that he had won Helen's heart. He had won it on false pretences perhaps, and, since it could be seen with half an eye that he had a guilty conscience, to bring him to his knees might be no hard matter. But from the moment that Helen loved him, everything had to be reconsidered. Is there, Miss Bligh had demanded of her trusted confidant Spurling, any kindness in telling a blind man that he is living in a hovel when he imagines himself in a palace? To which Spurling had unhesitatingly replied, "None whatever, provided you are sure that the optic nerve has been destroyed." There could be no certainty that Helen's eyes might not become opened on some evil day; but Spurling strongly opined that she must take her chance of that. Spurling, who was a great deal more interested in and anxious about the progress of his slowly mending patient than about any young woman's love affairs, deprecated intermeddling and adjured Miss Bligh not to kill Colonel Julyan by rehabilitating his character. So during the latter part of Helen's sojourn in London there had been a truce, and now that, to her immense joy and satisfaction, she was again established at Lavernock, acquiescence in any state of things which made for her

happiness seemed more than ever to impose itself upon her well-wishers.

She looked at her watch presently and remarked, "They ought to be here in a few minutes."

Forrester and Spurling were coming down for the week-end. The Bartons also were expected on a longer visit, Lady Elizabeth having been pleased to signify her approval of an engagement which she would have been powerless to prevent had she disapproved of it. Hardly what you could call a brilliant match, her ladyship had observed; still Helen had perhaps brilliance enough for two, and it was a point in young Forrester's favour that he was not disposed to be masterful.

He certainly was not. He tried hard to look as happy and exultant as the betrothed of a beautiful girl with vast possessions ought to look; but an unruly integrity of temperament and a countenance which had never been drilled into concealment of its owner's feelings stood in his way. Helen could not but notice his dejection. That she made loyalty to Colonel Julyan and distress at her own inability to condone that traitor's misdeeds accountable for it, and that she loved and admired him all the more in consequence, only enhanced the irony of the whole well-nigh unendurable situation. Again and again he was upon the brink of confession. If he paused on the brink, it was not, to do the poor fellow justice, mere personal timidity that held him back. There was, so Spurling assured him, a very real danger that some sudden emotion, or even annoyance, might prove fatal to Julyan, and by the time that that danger seemed to have passed away a good many things had happened.

His engagement had been announced; his people had been affectionately received in St. James's Square by their future daughter-in-law; it had been arranged that the marriage should take place quietly in the autumn; his retirement from the service, rendered almost obligatory by the claims of the position which he was destined to fill, had been decided upon. Retreat grew daily more difficult, while remorse, unhappily, grew more and more keen.

So it was with a somewhat sorry reproduction of his old boyish smile that Forrester emerged upon the terrace where Helen was waiting for him, and the robust cheerfulness of Spurling, who had travelled down from London with him, was needed to lend some air of jollity to their joint arrival.

"I bring you good news," Spurling said, as he shook hands with Miss Bligh. "The Colonel stood the move to Maidenhead splendidly, and my being here now is the best proof that he's out of the wood, or nearly so."

"Three cheers!" cried Miss Bligh aggressively.

To relieve the moment of complete silence which this ejaculation inevitably brought about, Helen inquired whether anything more had been heard as to Lady Lavernock's condition, and was told that the last accounts of the unfortunate woman were as bad as could be. Since her removal to an asylum she had sunk into settled melancholia; it was with the utmost difficulty that she could be induced to swallow food, and she had lost strength so rapidly that her life was considered to be in imminent danger.

"Not that you need pity her for that," Spurling

added. "Her friends, if she has any, must hope that she may be dying."

"Can't we talk about something else?" struck in Forrester, with a species of plaintive petulance which he had often displayed of late. "There are other things to talk about, you know—heaps of things. What a ripping place this is! I don't wonder at your loving it, Helen."

Helen was always ready to enlarge upon the beauties and charms of her home, and conversation was kept up briskly enough until Mr. Barton and Lady Elizabeth arrived to complete the small party. Mr. Barton, set free for a short time from official cares and thankful for surcease of domestic scandals, was in a benign mood; Lady Elizabeth was full of proposals for the due celebration of her niece's coming nuptials, which her niece proceeded to knock gently but firmly on the head; soon it was time to dress for dinner, and the evening passed off without any incident of an unpleasant nature.

To have spent several hours in Miss Bligh's vicinity without the occurrence of unpleasant incidents was better fortune than poor Forrester had dared to anticipate; for although he had not found her openly hostile since their conversation in the library at St. James's Square, she had not spared him occasional remarks which admitted of a double interpretation, nor had she refused herself the solace of a malicious little smile when those shafts of hers had gone visibly home. But Miss Bligh, as has been said, was growing infirm of purpose. She frankly acknowledged as much, in the course of the evening, to Spurling, who annoyed her by replying that he was very glad to hear it.

"You ought not to be glad," said she; "it's shabby and immoral of you to be glad."

"Well, I sin in good company, it seems."

"Oh, if you mean mine, I'm a woman."

"Far be it from me to deny that that's conclusive. All that I know about women goes to support your inference. I'm a little surprised to hear it suggested by you, though."

"You wouldn't be if you knew anything about anything. Women are not more immoral than men—quite the contrary. Only for them the abstract doesn't exist. Ask them whether a particular line of conduct is right or wrong, and, if they have the courage to tell you what they really think, they'll answer that it all depends. But the male mind is supposed to be more logical and judicial. In other words, I'm so fond of Helen that, rather than spoil her happiness, I'm prepared to throw Colonel Julian to the wolves; and I should respect you more, David, if you were to look a little bit disgusted, instead of rubbing your hands and grinning."

Whether in the hope of earning Miss Bligh's respect or from other incentives, Spurling's face took on a more serious expression. "It's an intricate business," he said; "we can't go into it now, with Forrester staring at us and Lady Elizabeth thirsting for bridge. I say, are you going to church tomorrow?"

"Of course. So are you."

"Am I? I had rather hoped I wasn't; but if you say I am, I suppose it is so. How about a walk and a talk in the afternoon, then?"

Miss Bligh replied that she didn't mind, and made the same response on behalf of herself and her

neighbour to Helen, who now crossed the room to beg assistance in making up a rubber for the two elders.

"As for me," Helen added under her breath, "I hate the very sight of cards, and I believe Eustace does too."

It would be a wonder if he didn't, Miss Bligh thought; but she had given up saying aloud what she thought about Captain Forrester. She saw the time coming when she would have to tell herself that he had been "more sinned against than sinning," or "the victim of circumstances"—some such feeble formula being requisite to salve even a conscience avowedly feminine. The trouble with her was that she did not happen to be as immune from the tyranny of abstract principles as she had asserted that her sex in general is. For love of Helen Monk she might consent to commit a crime or be privy to one; but assuring herself that such conduct was justified by events would not make her believe anything of the kind. Moreover, her heart had gone out to Colonel Julyan, who ought to have won Helen's heart, and had almost seemed to do so, yet who had somehow contrived to get himself beaten by a manifestly inferior rival. Upon the whole, therefore, it might prove consoling or exculpating to hear what David Spurling had to say for himself.

Now Major Spurling had something quite important to say, and had come down to Wiltshire for the express purpose of saying it. It was, however, of a personal nature and was but indirectly connected with the subject of which Miss Bligh's mind was full. No doubt this was why his attention wandered and his

answers were provokingly irrelevant during the first half-mile of the walk upon which he and she duly set forth on the succeeding afternoon. As soon as they reached the cool shelter of the woods for which they had been making, Miss Bligh lowered her sunshade and struck the ground with it emphatically.

"Look here," said she; "I can amuse myself better on a blazing hot day than by spurring an unwilling horse. So if you're going to be mute and evasive, I'm off home to read a book."

"I beg your pardon," answered Spurling, with unwonted humility. "I don't want to evade anything; only the fact of the matter is that I can't think of more than one thing at a time, and just now it's the question of your future that rather bothers me."

Miss Bligh looked more surprised than gratified. "Much obliged," said she, "but I don't quite see why it should. I'm very well able to look after myself and my future, whatever it may be, thank you."

"Yes; but what *is* it to be?" Spurling persisted. "You won't, if I know anything of you—and you'll allow perhaps that I do know something of you—consent to stay on with Miss Monk after she marries."

"I'll allow that your searching analysis of my character hasn't misled you there."

"And, from what you have told me, I gather that you have hardly what can be called an independent income."

"A fluctuating two hundred a year. It doesn't exceed that figure, and it's apt to fall short of it when certain mines reduce or pass their dividend."

"My dear Susan!—what business have you to hold

mining shares? It only shows—but I'll come to that later. So then what is it to be? Governessing again?"

"I suppose so. Unless some elderly lady or mentally afflicted person wants an amiable companion. That's all there is."

"Well," said Spurling unemotionally, "there's me. You might just consider the alternative. It isn't a dazzling one, I grant you. I'm not as young as I was in the days when you sent me to the right-about; I have no prospects worth mentioning; my means, beyond my pay, don't amount to much more than yours, and I've a fancy for being master in my own house which you mightn't like. On the other hand, if you look at my negative merits, I'm neither an old woman nor a person of weak intellect."

"I'm not so sure of that, David," answered Miss Bligh gravely; "I'm not at all so sure of that. This absurd suggestion of yours couldn't have come from the hard-headed Army surgeon I took you for. I give you all due credit for softness of heart, though."

"Not at all!" protested Spurling eagerly; "nothing of the sort! If you fancy that I'm attempting to be sentimental at my time of life, you mistake me altogether. What I'm proposing to you is a businesslike arrangement for your advantage and mine. I want a home; so do you. I want looking after in some ways, and I'm sure you do in others—witness those investments of yours! And, mind you, it isn't as if we didn't understand one another pretty well. We may have our little differences, but they don't blind us to one another's sterling qualities—at least, I may say

that they don't blind me to yours—and it's my belief that we should get on together better than most couples do. I wish you would think of it, Susan!"

Perhaps it would be doing Miss Bligh's maiden modesty no great injustice to say that she had thought of it. The resumption of an old intimacy had been, upon the whole, extremely pleasant to her, and during the process of its renewal there had been passages which may have prepared her in some degree for this issue. But she was not the woman to accept compassionate protection; neither did matrimony upon a basis of mutual accommodation commend itself to her. Thus it came about that Spurling, in spite of his disclaimer, had to plead guilty to a touch of sentiment, if not of sentimentality. A faded photograph, representing the slim Susan of an earlier day, came out of his pocket; confession was made of sundry regretful, not to say remorseful, hours; the sad lot of a bachelor who in middle age remained faithful to the dreams of youth, and whose constancy was surely deserving of something a little less ungenerous than ridicule, was touchingly depicted.

"Mephistopheles" with Martha! Uncle Toby with the Widow Wadman!" laughed Miss Bligh, while she hastily flicked something off her eyelid. "No; I don't suppose you look particularly like either of them; but I haven't the smallest doubt that I look like an old fool. And well I may," she added suddenly facing him, "for Lord knows it's what I am, David!"

It is a well-known and melancholy fact that nobody is ever too old to be a fool; but then again there are phases of wisdom which only wear the outward aspect

of folly by reason of certain physical conditions with which they are really in no wise concerned. If Spurling and Miss Bligh were fatally doomed to look ludicrous as a pair of lovers, that is a very good reason for not looking at them, and there is no need to report their conversation until it reached, at a somewhat advanced hour, the topic upon which they had ostensibly met to converse. With a necessarily condensed, yet exhaustive, summing up of the warring forces by which she found herself assailed, Miss Bligh brought her hearer back to the standpoint of the previous evening.

"You called it an intricate business, and I don't say that it hasn't intricacies for a poor, weak woman. But now what I want to know is how a resolute, upright, sensible man means to deal with it."

"Such a man as you describe, my dear Susan," answered Spurling, "usually makes it a rule to mind his *own* business."

"Don't beg the question, David. Tell me this; are you convinced now of what has been as clear as the sun at noonday to me all along? Do you believe now that Colonel Julyan never sat down to play with Lavernock and never won a penny of his money?"

"A doctor," Spurling replied, after remaining silent for a moment, "sees and hears many things which he is bound to keep to himself; still I won't make more mysteries than I can help with you, Susan. To you I'll go the length of saying that I have had to accept your theory. At first it seemed to me past belief. I didn't believe that any man, let alone a man of Colonel Julyan's sort, would be such an infernal ass—saving

your presence—as to behave like that. But human nature is for ever springing surprises upon one.”

Miss Bligh could not repress a slight smile of triumph. “It was no surprise to me,” she declared, “and even if I hadn’t hit off the scent at once, Captain Forrester would have put me on to it before this. That young man is simply shaking in his shoes with fear and shame.”

“Poor devil!”

“Yes; but what about poor Colonel Julyan? You and I could clear his character if we chose, David. All we should have to do would be to tackle Captain Forrester, and there wouldn’t be the least difficulty about it.”

“Well, why haven’t you tackled him? But I needn’t ask. You realise the cruelty and futility of interfering; you have realised by this time that you were on the wrong scent when you imagined that Miss Monk was in love with the Colonel.”

“Ah, there it is! If I thought that there was any chance of bringing Helen and Colonel Julyan together, I would tackle Captain Forrester as soon as look at him.”

“But as there isn’t any, you’ll hold your hand. Well and good: so much for you! Now let me state my case. I don’t like to see an innocent man condemned and pelted with mud; I don’t like it a bit. But then I say to myself that it’s what he has chosen of his own accord, that undoing his work will only make other people unhappy, without increasing his happiness at all, and that as far as social obloquy goes he’ll live that down—always supposing that he does live.”

"He is out of danger, isn't he?"

"No; he isn't really out of danger yet, and I'm not sure that he ever will be. I'm by no means sure that such a shock as he would get if he were to hear that this marriage had been broken off on his account might not be the death of him."

"David," exclaimed Miss Bligh tragically, "are we going to slink out of it on that pretext?"

"I think I am," Spurling replied; "it's a sound one. You, of course, have others, which as I gather, seem to you sufficient."

Thereupon Miss Bligh astonished him by abruptly bursting into tears.

"Oh, don't fuss!" she sobbed, mopping her eyes with her handkerchief; "I shall be all right in a minute. We'll do as you say; we won't make mischief. I can't have Helen's life spoilt for her. But to my dying day I shall never be able to forgive myself!"

CHAPTER XXIII

FORRESTER HAS A SURPRISE

ALTHOUGH Lady Elizabeth Barton did not consider herself or like to be considered old-fashioned, she clung to divers early Victorian customs which have fallen into general disuse, amongst which was attendance at afternoon service on Sundays. Sometimes, of course, she had to forego this pious practice, owing to there being no afternoon service to attend; but at Lavernock an ancient, toothless Rector, who had himself been for many years out of touch with innovators, met her spiritual requirements, and soon after luncheon she set forth to be lulled to repose by him. Mr. Barton preferred slumbering, under cloak of attending to correspondence, in the library; so, as Spurling and Miss Bligh had already vanished, the betrothed couple could look forward to some uninterrupted hours of one another's company.

They wandered about the gardens which had for so long been Helen's joy and pride; they formed plans for the shining future which lay before them; they exchanged reminiscences of a nature always interesting to lovers and were happy together, as indeed they could hardly help being. Yet it was Helen who did most of the talking, and at length Forrester's preoccupation became so noticeable that something had to be said about it.

"There's such a thing as being rather frightened at one's good fortune," was the explanation that he gave, in reply to inquiries. "You know Helen—or, if you don't, I'm sure Miss Bligh will tell you—I'm inferior to you in every way. What if you were to repent of having married me when it was too late?"

Helen laughed. "I am not given to repenting of anything that I do," she declared, with a good deal of truth; "and please don't say again that you are inferior to me, Eustace, for I don't like it. I am not the least silly about you; I know exactly what you are, and you are exactly what, in my opinion, a man ought to be. Very likely you won't set the Thames on fire; but who wants an incendiary husband? I don't, for one. The husband I want—the only husband I could ever love or endure to live with—is just such a man as you are, a man who is brave and modest and chivalrous and who is simply incapable of a mean thought or act."

"Nobody is incapable of meanness," sighed the ex-cruciated Forrester. "Suppose you were to discover that, after all, I had done some beastly mean thing?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Helen protested. "I've paid you as many compliments as are good for you, and you will get no more from me by suggesting impossibilities."

She was quite impervious to any such suggestion of his; evidently she had no inkling of what he was driving at; evidently Miss Bligh had not paved the way for a revelation which he knew not how to withhold any longer. He very nearly came out with it there and then. Possibly he would have done so if they had not encountered the head gardener, taking a Sunday afternoon stroll through the grounds, and if that functionary had not been inordinately fond of the sound of his own voice.

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The return of Lady Elizabeth, somewhat exhausted by the heat and by an unexpected dissertation from a strange parson upon the Higher Criticism which had murdered sleep, gave the signal for tea, and thus one more opportunity was lost.

Mr. Barton was mildly jocular over the late arrival of Spurling and Miss Bligh, who did not put in an appearance until nearly seven o'clock.

"It's quite a relief to see you," he remarked; "we began to think you must have eloped."

Spurling looked a little foolish; but his companion preserved her composure.

"Let nobody who yearns to elope with me hope for encouragement," said she. "I don't possess many rags to my back; but, such as they are, the man doesn't breathe who could induce me to leave them behind for his sake."

"No heart, partner?" asked Mr. Barton, in facetious allusion to an unfortunate oversight of Miss Bligh's on the previous evening.

"On the contrary," she returned, "it's just because I have one and because it has been working for no matter how many years that I can't consent to be hurried up hill. So we're rather late this time. It shall not occur again, though, I promise you; for if there's one thing that I hate more than another, it's being done out of my tea."

No doubt there were one or two things which Miss Bligh hated even more than that, and in a subsequent hurried interview with Helen she owned that she did not relish the idea of incurring disrespectful ridicule.

"I don't mind your knowing," said she, after making brief announcement of her changed prospects, "because there's nothing I wouldn't tell you, and because I know

you wouldn't for the world hurt an elderly spinster's feelings by laughing at her ; but for goodness' sake don't breathe a word to anybody else ! David has been sworn to secrecy. Incredible as it may appear, I do believe he is proud of his conquest, and he seemed quite surprised and disappointed when I warned him that if he gave me away, all should be over between us. He said he couldn't for the life of him see what we had to be ashamed of."

"Nor can I," answered Helen, "and I don't for a moment believe that you are ashamed. Oh, Susie, how glad I am !—and how relieved ! I have been half hoping for this, although I scarcely dared to hope."

She added, after the embraces appropriate to the occasion had been exchanged, that of course she would comply with her friend's wish so far as her uncle and aunt were concerned, but that she really must be allowed to tell Eustace, and leave to make that exception was reluctantly granted.

"*He* will laugh, if anybody does," grumbled Miss Bligh. "Not before me, though. No, I don't think Captain Forrester will laugh at me to my face." She concluded, in a voice grave with menace, "He'd better not !"

He falsified anticipation by refraining from laughing at her behind her back. That Spurling and she should marry if they were so disposed did not strike him as a joke, nor even as a circumstance of any great consequence or interest. Something much more irresistibly comic than that would have been needed to draw a smile from him as he sat, smoking meditatively, beside Helen in the garden after dinner and listened to what she described as the best of good news. The worst of bad news was what he had to offer in return. His mind was at length made up to that. If what he was going

to do involved a breach of faith with Colonel Julyan, he was sorry; but there was no help for it. Nor was there any help for other misfortunes which it might, and almost certainly would, entail. Further reticence had become a sheer impossibility, and by leading him out into the seclusion of the starlit summer night Helen had only anticipated the request which he had been upon the point of making as soon as Mr. Barton and Lady Elizabeth had begun to nod post-prandially over their respective books. But it was not easy to make a start, and her rejoicings at the mould into which her friend's future had so happily shaped itself gave him no assistance.

"It is an old attachment revived," she was saying, "which makes it all the more hopeful and satisfactory. I have been worrying myself to death about Susie; for I couldn't imagine what was to become of her. Naturally, I wanted her to live with us; but she wouldn't hear of that. She said that, for one thing, you wouldn't like it."

"Oh, I shouldn't have minded," answered Forrester, seeing an opening at last and making for it; "but she would. The fact is that Miss Bligh doesn't like me, and I'm afraid I can tell you why."

"You needn't," laughed Helen; "the very simple reason is that poor Susie would never like any husband of mine much. One doesn't, as a rule, manage to be very fond of one's friends' husbands or wives, does one? Not that I shall have the least difficulty in being fond of Major Spurling, who is a most excellent man, besides being, in this instance, the incarnation of poetical justice."

"Poetical justice," observed Forrester, who perceived that he would have to break his fences for himself, "is

all very well ; but one can't command it. One must try to be as just as one can on one's own hook, and I know that's what you always want to be, Helen. It isn't your fault that you have been horribly unjust to the Colonel, but—you have."

Dim as the light was, he saw Helen's face change. Her voice also had an altered and chilly ring as she replied : " Eustace, it makes me miserable that we should differ about that man, or about anybody or anything else ; but differ we must. Perhaps he was not the only cause of Lavernock's death, and it may be true that he was not anxious to play that night, and it is certainly true that his punishment has been severe. If I admit that, and if I agree to speak to him when we meet—which will not be often, I hope—you can't call me unjust. But don't ask me to be friends with him. Of his own free will he made me a solemn promise, and then, upon provocation so slight that it seems to me like no provocation at all, he broke it. Frankly, I call such an offence unpardonable, and so would you, who are the soul of honour yourself, if anybody but Colonel Julyan had committed it."

A subdued moan broke from Forrester, who rejoined : " You won't call me the soul of honour presently, and it isn't the Colonel who needs your pardon. A good deal might be said ; but I believe the best plan is to tell you the bare fact. The Colonel never played with Lavernock at all. It was I who played with him and I who won his money."

Helen drew in her breath quickly, but said nothing. Whether she did not trust herself to speak or whether she felt that a statement so abrupt and so appalling must be amplified before any comment could be made

upon it he could only conjecture; but, as she did not help him, he went on:

"Yes, that's the bare fact. Now I'll tell you how it all happened. Of course I ought not to have sat down to cards with Lavernock; I had as good as promised you that I wouldn't, and the Colonel didn't wish it, and God knows I didn't wish it myself! I was feeling very seedy and all I wanted was to go to bed. But Lavernock jeered at me, and I got rather hot, and at last, like a fool, I consented to play a few hands. Well, when once I had begun there was no stopping. He wouldn't let me go after I had lost, and I could hardly insist upon giving up after I had won. Then nothing would satisfy him but doubles or quits, and the end of it was that I found myself the winner of some preposterous sum. He gave me an I.O.U. for it, and I tore up the paper as soon as he was out of the room. He wasn't quite—well, not quite himself, you know, and I really hoped he would have forgotten all about it by the morning."

Here Forrester paused for a moment and sighed, while Helen remained absolutely mute and motionless.

"You know," he resumed, "what happened afterwards. What with the horror of it and what with influenza coming on, I was almost off my head at the time, and my memory is rather confused; but I recollect Spurling's reading us that letter which was addressed to him and saying that it couldn't be suppressed; which of course meant that everybody, including you, must hear that I had won a lot of money from Lavernock. I believe I was in a great state of despair, for it seemed to me that I couldn't hope to be forgiven, and I suppose the Colonel was

sorry for me. Anyhow, as soon as Spurling had left us he pointed out that my name didn't appear in the letter and that if he chose to say he had been the winner, nobody would be in position to contradict him. I remember that he called it a simple solution of the difficulty."

"And you gave your consent to that?" asked Helen, breaking silence at last.

"I don't think so; but if you'll believe me—I hope you will, for it's God's truth!—I can't say whether I did or not. I fancy Spurling must have interrupted us; he hustled me off upstairs, I know. Nothing more comes back to me until I was sitting up in bed one morning and asking for a newspaper. The one they brought me didn't give a report of the inquest, which was over and done with by that time; but some paragraphs and a few abusive letters told me how things had gone. As you may suppose, my first idea was to write to the Home Secretary or somebody and say that there had been an awful miscarriage of justice; but the Colonel clapped the gag on me at once by asking whether I wanted to see him sent into penal servitude for perjury. Unfortunately, there's no getting away from the fact that he did perjure himself, and I daresay it's true that judges and juries don't take account of motives. So—there it was. Since then I've begged the Colonel several times to let me at least take you into our confidence; but he has always refused, and in his present state he can't be argued with. Now, Helen, you know everything, and, come what may of it, I'm glad and thankful that you do. Miss Bligh, I'm sure, guesses, if she doesn't actually know. Perhaps you will think that I ought to have spoken before. All I can say is that if I hadn't been in a sort of way pledged to

silence, I should have spoken long ago. The Colonel will accuse me of having betrayed him ; but I'm certain you can be trusted to keep his secret——”

“I can't do that!” interrupted Helen suddenly.

She got up, saying, “I must have a minute or two alone. I must decide by myself what ought to be done. Please wait here until I come back. I shall not be long.”

He could form no idea from her voice or manner of how his disclosure had affected her. He watched her while she walked slowly as far as the balustrade which bounded the terrace and while she stood there, gazing out into the night, with her back towards him and her hands clasped behind her. She might be trying to make some excuse for him—there were, after all, obvious excuses—she might be condemning him on the ground that, with or without extenuating circumstances, he had deceived her ; she might be debating whether the tremendous sacrifice which Colonel Julyan had made upon the altar of friendship could be accepted or not. For something less than five minutes, which seemed to him like something more than a quarter of an hour, she remained in the same posture, and when at length she turned to retrace her steps, his heart sank. She was going, he felt convinced, to tell him that she was sorry for him, but that she could not respect him and could never now be his wife. Had she not already declared that the class of offence to which he had pleaded guilty was in her eyes an unpardonable one ? The greater was his amazement to find her arms flung round him and her lips pressed upon his cheek.

“Oh, you poor boy !” she whispered, “how miserable you must have been !”

He broke out into an incoherent rhapsody of joy and

gratitude. Had she forgiven him, then? Was she certain that she quite forgave him?

"I have nothing to forgive," was her answer. "At least, only one thing. You ought to have known better than to think that I should blame you for having let poor Lavernock tempt you into gambling with him. I should have perfectly understood, and I wish you had not made that mistake, because then—but we won't talk about it. All the rest was done without your consent or knowledge. You were driven into an *impasse*, and no wonder you couldn't see how to escape from it!"

It was, at any rate, no wonder that this complete and unhoped-for acquittal filled all his thoughts and speech for some little time; but he ended by remembering less fortunate people and asking Helen whether there was any practicable way of righting poor Julyan's wrongs.

"I don't know," she answered rather coldly; "I shall have to make inquiries. The whole truth ought to be published; but of course we cannot help to send him to prison, if there is any real risk of a prosecution."

"It would be rather a queer way of rewarding him, wouldn't it? Yet one hates to think of the things that have been said about him by people who aren't fit to black his boots."

"I hate to think of what he has done!" exclaimed Helen vehemently. "It was odious of him!"

"Odious of him!" echoed Forrester, aghast.

"Yes, odious! What right had he to lay us under such an obligation?—an obligation which, very likely, we shall never be able to discharge. All he had to do, all that was required of him, was to tell the plain truth. Nobody—I least of all—would have thought or suggested that poor Lavernock had been made a victim of by you.

But, instead of that, he must needs put himself and us in this horrible position! Anything more perversely cruel I can't conceive!"

If Forrester had not been very deeply in love, he might have thought a charge of perversity and cruelty more applicable to somebody else than to Julyan. Even as it was, he was shocked and much distressed.

"It never entered into my head that you would feel like that about it!" he ingenuously exclaimed. "I thought you would be awfully sorry for having misjudged him and—well, that you would want to beg his pardon."

"I am very sorry indeed that I should have been made to misjudge him," Helen answered, "if you call it misjudging him to have believed what he himself asserted on oath; but I can't see why I should beg his pardon for that."

"You'll admit, anyhow, that he has suffered pretty heavily in trying to serve us both."

"Yes, I admit that he has suffered. I shall have to thank him for humbling me in the dust. It is a clear duty, and I will take the earliest occasion of performing it. I suppose he is well enough now to see me if I go to his house."

"I think Spurling would say so; but—Helen, you'll be good to him, won't you?"

Helen laughed a little. "Oh, yes, I'll be good to him. One must assume that he meant to be good to us, and perhaps, if I were to reproach him, he would understand no better than you do. If it were only for your sake, Eustace, I would thank Colonel Julyan and say anything in my power that I thought he would like me to say. But I wish—with all my heart I wish—that I had never set eyes upon him!"

CHAPTER XXIV

TIRED WITH ALL THESE

"I'm glad that little job is accomplished," remarked Julyan, as he extended himself upon a low couch and folded up a document to which he had just appended his signature in the presence of witnesses. "I must apologise for lying down, but it doesn't take much to exhaust me now."

"I do hope," said Mr. Blandford, who had come to Maidenhead from London, armed with the last will and testament which he had been instructed to prepare, "that you don't share the silly popular superstition about this sort of thing."

"I certainly don't think," answered Julyan, smiling, "that I have hastened the hour of my death by making my will, but it seemed advisable to lose no more time about setting my affairs in order."

"Oh, you're all right, sir, you're all right!" Mr. Blandford asserted briskly. "Rest and country air will soon set you up. Still, as you had decided upon making fresh dispositions, it was as well to put the matter through at once, and I am glad to think that Major Spurling will come into an uncommonly handsome inheritance one of these days. May it be many years before he does!"

"I haven't the slightest doubt," observed Julyan,

"that Spurling would cordially echo that hope if he knew what we had been about. He has done his level best to keep life in me, anyhow, and such is his professional vanity that although he is far from being overburdened with money, and although he now proposes to burden himself with a wife, I believe it would annoy him beyond all measure to have me die on his hands."

"You're not going to die, sir; you aren't in the least danger of dying," the lawyer persisted, with that emphasis by which the well-intentioned are apt to betray their inner misgivings.

"So Spurling assures me. He will be here presently. Won't you lunch with us and congratulate him on his approaching marriage?"

But Mr. Blandford, pleading business engagements, took his leave. Julyan was not sorry to be left; for it was only too true that a very little exertion sufficed to tire him out. Spurling and the other doctors might say what they liked, but he was conscious of steadily decreasing vitality, and he had ascertained that, even should his life be prolonged for years, health and strength would never be his again. Now there is not much fun in being a solitary invalid, nor had this world anything left to offer him that he was not very willing to resign. "'Tired with all these,'" he murmured to himself, as he lay there, letting his eyes roam idly round the familiar walls and rest upon the various art treasures to which he had endeavoured to attach himself, *faute de mieux*. He was quite tired with existence and with what he had made of it; he found that he could contemplate departure from the world with an unfeigned equanimity which is probably rare, while he could recall the course of recent events with a

THE PERJURER

satisfaction which both pleased and surprised him. He had once dreaded the advent of a possible moment when he might wonder whether it had been worth while to do what he had done. That moment, he was now gladly certain, would not come. The joy of unknown, unacknowledged self-sacrifice for the sake of a beloved fellow-creature is a real and durable joy. All his life long, all his easy, selfish life long, he had derided such high-flown notions, maintaining and believing that self-interest is of necessity the mainspring of every human action; but now at the end he was to discover that, after all, there lurks in mortal nature some dim spark of divine origin. It was queer, it was incongruous, it was doubtless from some points of view ridiculous; but—it was so. And this was extremely fortunate for him in his otherwise stripped and denuded plight. He liked to think that he was setting a not ignoble finish to a career of which the futility had always been more or less apparent to him, and that nothing in its whole course had become him so well as his relinquishment of it. Pleasant also was it to think that, without despoiling anybody, save distant and indifferent relatives, he could bestow ease upon the worthy Spurling; and most of all did he rejoice that Helen Monk's future happiness looked secure. He had no longer any feeling akin to jealousy of Forrester; he had ceased to wonder at her having chosen a young man who, with many engaging qualities, did not differ from fifty other young men of the same class; what alone mattered was that she should never see cause to repent of her choice. "And she won't," Julyan reflected, "after he becomes her husband. From his wedding day he will be safe against all the winds that blow, just because he will be

her husband. But so long as she hasn't actually married him, and so long as I linger upon the scene, there will always be some danger lest the poor beggar's sensitive conscience should impel him to betray me, and if that were to happen, the glamour would be off him as sure as fate! It's one more reason for not delaying my farewell bow."

Soon he was shaking hands with Spurling, who, after a rapid scrutiny of him, felt his pulse, grunted and said. "You have been tiring yourself."

"My dear man," answered Julyan, "I'm always tired."

Spurling grunted again. "Well," said he, "we must see how you are after you have had something to eat and drink. I told Forrester he might come down and pay you a visit this afternoon; but I'm not sure that I shall let him in."

"Of course he must be let in. I'm well enough—as well as I ever shall be. I daresay you have cautioned him against irritating the animal."

"Yes," answered Spurling hesitatingly and a little uneasily, "I have; but——"

"Oh, well, let him say what he likes. After all, what *does* it matter? Neither he nor anybody else can make that pulse of mine which doesn't satisfy you beat much faster at this stage of the proceedings, I suspect. Would it be very ungrateful to remark that you and your colleagues have taken a lot of trouble which you might just as well have spared yourselves?"

"Yes, Colonel, it would," returned Spurling gruffly; "it would be damned ungrateful."

"Then I'll hold my peace. As a matter of fact, I am grateful. Not exactly thankful, though, if you can

detect a shade of distinction between the two adjectives."

Spurling observed that he was not much of a hand at drawing fine distinctions. He might have added that he was an extremely poor hand at keeping a secret and that he knew it. That was why he hastened to divert the conversation from a perilous channel by embarking upon eulogies of his future wife.

"For my part, I don't mind owning that I'm both grateful to Susan Bligh and thankful for having met her again. You and I don't think much of women in a general way of speaking; but one has to allow that there are exceptions, and by Jove! she's one of them. A remarkable woman, Susan—very remarkable indeed. Anybody can see that she has a kind heart, but you've got to know her to find out what a clear head she has. Upon my word, I'd as soon trust Susan's judgment in a difficulty as my own!"

"That," remarked Julyan, "is quite the right spirit in which to confront matrimony. Cling to it, Spurling."

"I shall make no mistake if I do," Spurling declared. "All the same, perhaps you had better not tell her I said so. It mightn't be good for her."

"I see no prospect of my ever having the chance to tell her anything," said Julyan.

"She'll take care that you have plenty of chances. Between you and me, Colonel, nobody appreciates you more than Susan does, and I doubt whether you have a firmer friend in the world."

He was getting on to dangerous ground again, and when Julyan, looking more apprehensive than flattered, inquired why Miss Bligh should honour a universally censured man with her friendship, he had to make a

hurried and evasive reply to the effect that of course she had had wit enough to recognise the injustice of a censure which had been by no means universal.

"But I won't hark back to a forbidden subject. Now, are you going to have your luncheon here, or shall I give you an arm into the diningroom?"

Spurling's appetite for luncheon was not much keener than his patient's. He talked incessantly all through that meal and affected a joviality which only threw up into clearer relief his evident lack of ease. It was as well that Julyan, weary and somewhat drowsy, was more occupied with his own thoughts than with his guest.

"I wonder," he said, after smoking half a cigarette, "whether I should have time for a nap before Forrester comes. If so, I think I'll ask you to excuse my bad manners and let me go and lie down again."

"Heaps of time," answered Spurling with alacrity. "You can't do better than give yourself a rest while I stroll up to the station to meet Forrester."

He conducted Julyan back to the sofa in the other room, made him comfortable and set forth with a jaunty air and a rather troubled mind. Not without reluctance and misgivings had he sanctioned the interview which was imminent. He might have forbidden it if Miss Bligh, for whose proved insight he had conceived the respect to which he had confessed,⁹ had not joined Helen in making demand for it. But then again he might have yielded; for Helen was quietly, resolutely bent upon seeing Colonel Julyan, and Helen was not an easy person to thwart. Neither to Spurling nor to Miss Bligh had she spoken of Julyan as she had done to Forrester; she had merely said that, having—however excusably and unavoidably—maligned him, she felt

bound to make verbal amends, and had added that it was essential for her to obtain speech of him in order that she might, if possible, shape her future conduct in accordance with his wishes. This, Spurling had admitted, was not unreasonable ; only Miss Monk would understand that his first duty was to his patient, who must on no account be agitated. There had, therefore, been protracted deliberations, resulting in a decision that Forrester should first see the invalid and avow what had to be avowed. Helen was to be stationed hard by, so that at a given moment she might be called in, and she had promised to make her visit both brief and unemotional. In pursuance of the above programme she had journeyed up to St. James's Square for a couple of nights, and in unwilling furtherance of it Spurling awaited her arrival on the Maidenhead platform. But when the train came and he helped her and Miss Bligh to alight, his first words were :

"I don't altogether approve of this, you know. As you are here, you must be allowed to see the Colonel, I suppose ; only there must be no arguing with him, mind. Whatever stipulations he may see fit to make you will have to agree to, whether you like them or whether you don't. Otherwise there will be trouble."

Forrester readily undertook to obey orders. The weight was off his mind, and he had a vague, happy conviction that everything was going to be all right now. Helen, without saying anything, made a gesture of assent. Upon her mind there remained a weight which could only be removed in one way, and that a very disagreeable, if not unattainable one. Still, she did not propose to argue with her misguided benefactor, much less to upbraid him. Upon the whole, her heart had become somewhat

softened towards a man who had indeed been guilty of a most deplorable error of judgment, yet who must be credited with altruistic motives. When all was said, he could not have relished perjuring himself, nor could he have enjoyed recent criticisms, public and private, on his conduct. Moreover, it had been a little hard upon him to be half killed in revenge for an offence which he had never committed.

Spurling escorted the party to Colonel Julyan's garden, which they entered without approaching the house, and, as soon as he had provided them with chairs by the bank of the river, went to see whether his patient was ready to receive the expected visitor. He was only absent a few minutes, and the report which he brought back was quite favourable.

"The Colonel has had a sleep and looks refreshed. He says he'll be very glad to see you, Forrester. Now what I want you to do is to tell him quickly and quietly. I haven't said a word to prepare him for what is coming; so he is sure to be a bit shocked and startled. But the main thing is to get that over as soon as possible. Don't upset him by beating about the bush. And if he seems faint or short of breath, call me at once."

Thus admonished, Forrester crossed the lawn with a light step and a light heart to discharge his mission. He could not see why there should be any serious trouble now that Helen knew all, and he anticipated nothing more formidable than the scolding which he might perhaps be considered to have earned.

"Well, Colonel," he began cheerfully, as he took the long, thin hand which Julyan extended to him, "I'm awfully glad to hear that you've been making progress."

"Oh, I'm progressing towards my goal, thank you,"

was Julyan's ambiguous reply. "Not very quickly, it's true; still I notice a slight advance every day. Sit down and let us hear all your news. Judging by the look of you, Wiltshire air must be salubrious. Why, you're a different man from what you were the last time you came down."

"I am," Forrester assented emphatically—"a very different man indeed! Now, Colonel, I've got a confession to make. I hope, when you've heard it, you won't call me a traitor; because I don't think I ever made any actual promise. But, frankly, I believe I should have broken it even if I had; there are things which flesh and blood can't endure. Well, the long and the short of it is that I had to let Helen know the truth about what happened on the night of Lavernock's death. I'm sure, if you think, you will see that I couldn't have married her on false pretences and that I was bound to make a clean breast of it for my own sake just as much as for yours."

Julyan's pale cheeks took on a greyish hue. He raised his hands slowly and let them fall with a despairing gesture. "Oh, you idiot!" he murmured; "oh, you idiot!"

But Forrester made haste to reassure him. "You needn't be the least alarmed; there's no harm done—nothing but good! What steps are to be taken, or can be taken, I don't know; you and Helen must settle that between you. Only of course you are absolutely safe. Whatever she may want, she certainly doesn't want to see you in the dock, and she certainly won't give you away."

Julyan broke into a short, unmirthful laugh. "Give me away! Man alive! don't you see that it is you who have given me away?—and yourself too, which is much more to the point."

"Indeed," declared Forrester eagerly, "you are quite mistaken. She never was angry with me for one moment; she understood at once. The only thing was that—well, to be honest, she rather disappointed me about you. She wasn't at first half as remorseful or half as grateful to you as I had expected her to be. On the contrary, she seemed rather to—to——"

"To think that I had taken an unwarrantable liberty?" suggested Julyan, with another brief laugh. "Yes, there would always be the chance of its striking her in that light, and it's perhaps better than her magnifying me into a hero, as she might have done. It comes to the same thing, though," he added, sinking back wearily upon his cushions; "it can't but come to the same thing. Perhaps you are hardly to blame; perhaps you couldn't help it. But none the less have you wrecked all my work!"

The mystified Forrester renewed his protestations. "I assure you it's all right! You have been extraordinarily good and generous to me, Colonel, and I can never thank you enough; but, to speak the plain truth, I'm a thousand times happier now than I was while Helen was being deceived."

"*O sancta simplicitas!*" groaned Julyan. "As if one committed felony and kicked one's little gods into the gutter to oblige a friend!"

And, as Forrester only looked more puzzled than ever, he resumed: "I'm afraid I must turn you out for to-day. I'm sorry, but I haven't the strength of a fly, and I shall have to rest a little, if I can. The best thing for you to do—the only thing—is to get Miss Monk to come and see me some day. If she were in London for shopping or anything and could spare time to run down

here, I should be grateful. It's just possible that a talk between her and me may repair this mischief."

"A talk with you is just what she wants above everything," said Forrester, getting up. "If you felt equal to seeing her now—Well, as a matter of fact, she's in the garden at this moment."

Julyan gave a long sigh. Evidently he did not feel equal to the effort required of him, and Forrester, visibly disappointed, could only say :

"Of course, if you're too tired, Colonel, Helen's visit must be put off; but I don't think she would keep you more than a few minutes."

"Oh, if it comes to that, I'm not too tired," Julyan answered. "Seeing Miss Monk won't kill me; it's all in the day's work. Only I should have liked a short time for preparation, if that could have been managed. There is a good deal to be said, and I have to economise my forces, and she and I may not be quite of one mind at starting."

"I'm sure she won't say a word that—that you will dislike," Forrester eagerly and somewhat boldly affirmed. "I told you just now—and perhaps I oughtn't to have told you—that she was a bit annoyed for a time at your having got yourself into such terrible trouble in order to screen me; but that was only because she didn't see the necessity for it. You'll find that all she wishes now is to make friends with you and to tell you how awfully sorry she is that——"

"Quite so," interrupted Julyan, with the ghost of a smile. He hoisted himself up laboriously into a more erect posture and went on :

"Since Miss Monk has taken all the trouble to come down here, I can't shut my door in her face. I'll see

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